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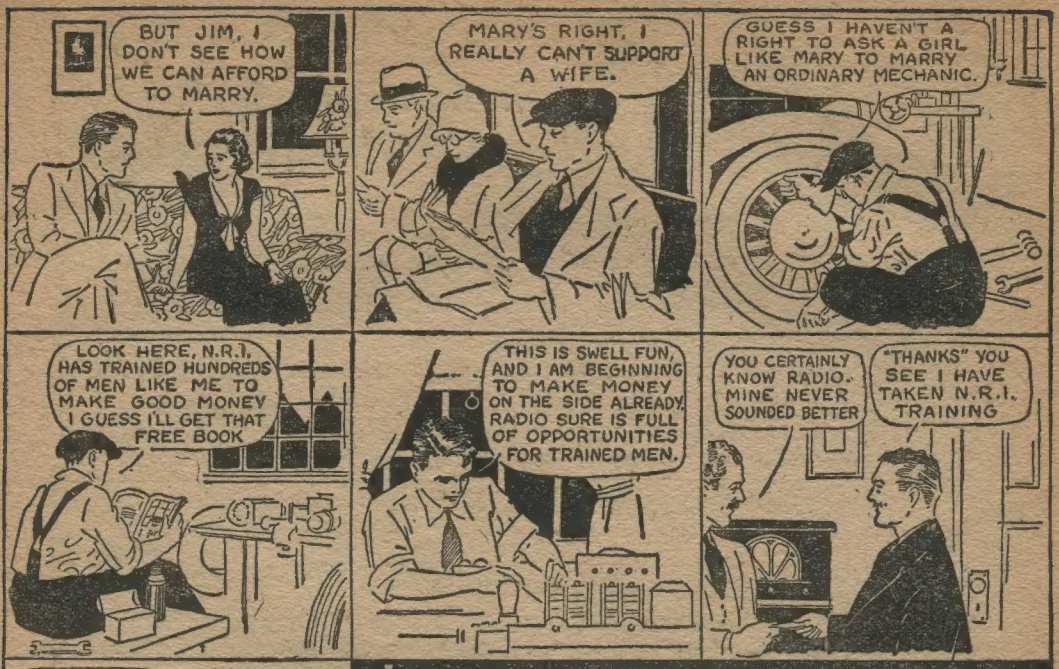

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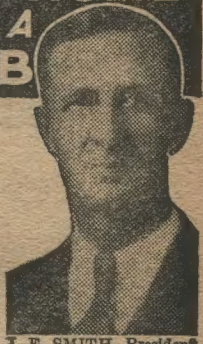

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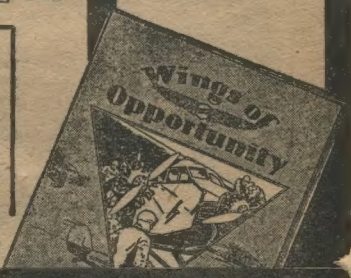

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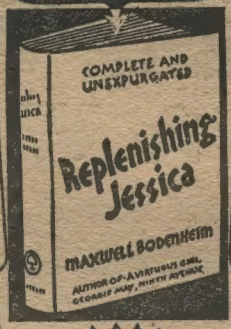

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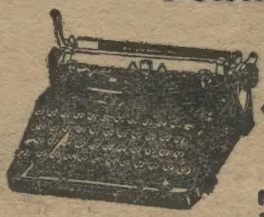

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CHAPTER I

Bank Raiders

SITTING straight in their kaks, two dark-clad, broad-shouldered riders cantered their broncs down the main street of Coyote Wells.

There was something grimly purposeful about the way they rode, the way their narrow eyes scanned the dark, false-fronted stores that edged the street. Black butted six-guns braced the riders' lean thighs, holsters thonged low on denim-clad legs.

Down the dark, almost deserted street, reins gripped tight, the riders pranced their broncs through the splashes of yellow light that streamed out into the street through the dirty windows of the town's main saloon.

The men reined in before a thick-

Outlaw Terror Rules the Rio—Where a

at Ramirez, Robber Lord of San Carlos!

LAWLESS

By LARRY A. HARRIS

Author of "Gunmen Also Die," etc.

walled 'dobe building diagonally across from the saloon, dismounted. They strode quickly to the pretentious plate glass door. There was a sign over the entrance that read: *Bank.*

Nothing hurried about the men's movements. It was as if they had business to attend to and wished to get it over with. And that is exactly what it was—business. Six-gun business!

Inside the building burned a single oil lamp that shed a soft glow in the dimness. One of the men tapped boldly on the door. Both men peered through the plate glass at the interior of the gloomy bank. A big wall clock inside proclaimed the hour of seven—the supper hour in Coyote Wells.

One of the men, face grim-lined in the shade of his curled Stetson brim, looked at the clock, then

Garrison of Renegades Stampedes the Law!

grinned thinly at his restless companion.

"On time," he said softly. "Hartmann's a fool to work so late."

The other man nodded grimly. He knocked impatiently on the door. Muffled foot-beats inside the bank moved doorward. Inside, a face pressed against the thick pane. The round, heavy-jowled face of a man whose eyes were magnified behind thick-lensed glasses.

He peered out, squinting into the gloom. He saw the two men outside and shook his head, motioning with his hands that the door was locked.

Outside on the steps one of the men nodded understandingly at the banker but motioned persistently for the door to be unlocked. Grimacing his annoyance, the fat banker unlocked the door. He pulled it open guardedly, just a few inches.

"No business do I do—" he began irritatedly.

Then he caught the significance of the dark, hard faces of the two men. A foot was jammed in the open door. Guns suddenly appeared in the hands of the two men. Eyes bugging, the fat banker stared, horrified, puffy jowls sagging, face paling. A scream started in his throat.

Lead snarled about Buck's head

"Shut up!" one of the men snapped. Both gunmen pushed inside the door, weapons prodding into the thick belly of the banker. "Shut up, Hartmann! Here's one piece of business yuh're gonna transact after regular hours. *You* steal durin' daylight hours. We have to work at night. Git busy, fatty. Open the safe!"

The German banker caught the menacing note in that commanding voice. His squat, thick-pouched body seemed to sag.

"Mein Gott!" he croaked gutturally. *"Mein Gott!"*

He moved back, guns still prodding him. Then he turned obediently, waddled with short jerky strides toward the rear of the bank. He rubbed his chubby hands together nervously, groans blubbering from his thick lips.

THE two men followed close behind him. They passed the grilled cages, stopped before the black steel vault door. The banker's shaking hands twirled the knob.

As he pulled open the heavy door the two men pushed him quickly inside ahead of them. One of the men stood guard over the banker while the other began a quick search through the drawers lining the walls.

The man holding the gun in Hartmann's belly struck a match with his free hand. Hartmann's face twitched convulsively in the flickering yellow light. Behind his thick-lensed glasses his eyes shone fearfully. Sweat beaded his fat, round head, showed through his short-clipped hair.

"Himmel!" he groaned again. He said it unconsciously, eyes goggling at every move the ransacking stick-ups made.

The man with the gun struck another match. "Find it, Cass?" he asked calmly.

The man called Cass, fumbling through the drawers, ignored the bound bundles of greenbacks in the lockers. He picked up one bundle of huge denominations, looked at it covetously, then tossed it aside. The

banker stared incredulously. Then a trace of hope flicked over his florid features.

"Lot of money here," the stick-up sighed, still at work. "South America's starin' us in the face, fella."

"Fergit it, Cass. This is gonna be one *honest* stick-up. The deal was not to touch any of old Heinie's *dinero* that he's stolen from honest ranchers and widows the past ten years. Jest the papers, Cass," he concluded tightly. "Better hurry. We're rowelin' our luck the limit."

Reluctantly the gent called Cass tossed aside more bills. Hartmann gaped, flabby face still ashen. Then Cass clutched a small paper bundle with a string around it. He struck a match, hurriedly scanned the printing on the cover closely.

On the outer fold of the document was the printed word, "Mortgage." Then below that was a signature, more written matter in smaller type. And the name, "Tejanolito *Rancho,* Chihuahua, Mexico."

IGNORING the gun at his stomach, the German banker's fat hand clawed out for the document.

"That's mine!" he shrilled. "With my own money do I buy that. Thief! It's—"

The man with the gun threw out his hand throttling the violent protests of the banker. Both stick-ups shoved the German roughly out of the vault. They bound him with cord they had in their denim pockets, gagged him. Then they left him on the floor, stepped cautiously out the front door.

Through the darkness they hurried to their broncs at a tie-rack close by.

The main street of Coyote Wells still looked deserted. The batwing doors of the saloon diagonally across the street slapped open. A man stepped outside, a shaft of light flooding past him. A star pinned to his sagging vest glittered brightly.

He stared searchingly across the street at the bank.

The two stick-ups were just hitting leather. Their broncs surged forward in a clatter of hoofs. The lawman shouted a challenge, hands snatching up his guns that crashed, tonguelike flames licking out in the direction of the two fleeing horsemen.

Leading the posse, the sheriff fired

His warning shout brought men pouring out of the saloon. Other guns cracked. Then the sheriff and five of his men raced for their broncs at the tie-rack. Other men, guns still in their hands, shouted and raced toward the open door of the bank.

About the heads of the two fleeing stick-ups lead whined, kicked up tiny spurts of dust in the road about them. They thundered out of town, hit the south trail for the Rio a mile away.

Along the dark, brush-hemmed trail they raced their broncs at a furious pace. As they topped a rise both men flung glances over their shoulders at the dark back trail. The posse was right behind them, lashing their broncs, snapping shots after the swift horsemen.

"Ride, Bucky Malone!" yelled Cass to his companion. "Ride like hell won't have yuh!"

Tight-lipped, eyes glued on the dark trail ahead, the two fleeing

men leaned far over the necks of their straining broncs.

They swerved past looming sandbanks jutting with black mesquite bushes. Through an outcropping of tall monumental rocks they clattered. Down cutbanks, hoofs chopping in tiny avalanches of gravel. Over a flat mesa jutting with Spanish dagger, hoofs drumming a fierce tattoo in the night.

Then ahead lay the shimmering river, sandy *barrancas* shoving out into the water from the brushy, dark shores.

The two men splashed their broncs out into the knee-deep water of the Rio. Safety lay just a few feet ahead—the south bank.

Mexico! *Manana* land where the law of the north couldn't touch them.

The two riders eased their broncs up on the sandy south bank. Far behind came the rumbling hoof-beats of the oncoming posse. Ahead, the Mexican shore lay ominously quiet and dark.

THEN, in the face of the two riders, rifle fire suddenly blasted the stillness. A startled curse on his lips, Cass stiffened in the kak, toppled to the ground, while his horse went down squealing, hoofs thrashing wildly in the air.

Buck Malone, the other stick-up, blinded but unhurt by the blast, flung himself from the saddle to the ground, hands clawing for his six-gun even as he fell.

Breathless seconds he lay motionless in the sand, collecting his senses, not daring to move. No sound broke the uncanny hush.

Cautiously he raised his head, stared through the gloom. Ahead of him lay the sprawled body of the outlaw, Cass.

Buck Malone cursed bitterly, twisted to look back at the dark north shore as the rumbling hoof-beats of the approaching posse swelled in volume.

He listened, body tense. Then, ahead of him, he heard the faint clatter of other riders receding in the opposite direction—south. Those would be the bushwhackers!

But *what* bushwhackers? Who in all Mexico savvied they were crossing at this exact spot tonight?

Buck Malone shook his head, fingers tenderly probing a bullet burn across his right cheek he had received in the sudden hail of bushwhackers' lead. Then as the pound of the oncoming posse came nearer, he leaped to his feet, sprinted up to the sprawled body of Cass.

"Cass!" he whispered anxiously. "Damn 'em, Cass, did they git yuh?"

A dazed light in his eyes, Cass looked up into Malone's face. Blood soaked the front of his flannel shirt. His face was haggard with pain.

"Something went wrong, Buck," he gasped weakly. "They—they got me—in the shoulder. Don't ask questions now! Take this"—he fumbled in his pocket, brought forth the document he had taken from the bank—"take this and ride like hell into this little Mex town of San Carlos. I was gonna explain everything to yuh, Buck, but—but we ain't got time now.

"Go to Ramirez' *cantina* in San Carlos. Find a gent named Wilson. He'll be—waitin'. He'll explain—" The man's body stiffened as the hammering hoofs of the approaching posse bore down on them. "I'll—to hell with *me*, Buck!" he panted desperately. "This is more important Don't argue—damn it! Ride!"

Already the sheriff's posse were splashing out into the water, yelling triumphantly, ignoring the international law which says no law enforcement bodies shall cross the Line. It was night.

Grasping the import of Cass' words, Buck Malone seized the document, whirled, raced for his bronc and hit leather in one flying leap. Lead snarled about his head, but he turned and yelled:

"I'll make 'er, Cass!"

And as the sheriff, at the head of his posse band, wheeled up beside Cass, the wounded outlaw grinned twistedly up at the lawman.

"*Bueno*, Sheriff Danner," he whis-

pered. "One of us made it anyhow. Now listen—"

But he said no more just then. He couldn't. Eyes closing, he fell back to the ground.

CHAPTER II

The Little Gringo

BUCK MALONE, riding hard toward the little Mex town of San Carlos to the south, turned his thoughts from Cass to a man by the name of Wilson who would have a lot of things to explain.

Malone cursed bitterly. Running off and leaving a pard to die in lawmen's hands wasn't exactly up to his code. Yet, Cass had wanted it this way—demanded it so.

As Malone felt of the document in his pocket he knew that even death must not stop him getting to a gent by the name of Wilson.

Now the 'dobes of San Carlos were grey in the wan moon-fog, blinking soft yellow light through paneless windows into the night. Shacks of 'dobe blocks and straw that smelled of filthy blankets, sweaty bodies and garlic. Men lounging in doorways, smoking *macuchis,* the red glows revealing swart, evil faces.

Fat women in black shaws shrilling at barefoot black waifs. Peaked-hatted *vaqueros* riding along the squalid main street toward the *cantina,* where a mechanical piano blared out into the night.

And *gringos,* too. Gents whose eyes were furtive, whose lean-fingered hands never strayed far from the worn gun-butts that protruded from the holsters at their hips, rode leisurely through the streets where goats and chickens picked at the garbage in the dust.

Such was San Carlos, just south of the Rio in the land of the lawless. San Carlos where Luis Ramirez, the *corregidor,* sold his rotgut *sotol* and his breed women to the evil-faced *gringos* who rode in and out of this settlement of hell under cover of night.

Luis Ramirez owned San Carlos. He slept during the blistering heat of the day, but as the shadows of night dropped over the desert valley in which his tiny outlaw settlement lay, he'd always be found in his *cantina,* lizard-lidded red eyes shuttling over the smoke-filled room.

Never a coin passed over the bar that Ramirez didn't watch with greedy eyes until it was dropped into the cash drawer by his *mestizo* bartender.

Never one of his short-skirted, hollow-eyed breed girls stole a dollar from a *gringo* killer but what Ramirez trailed her to the back room with his fat brown hand out for his half.

San Carlos, reeking in filth in this desert country south of the Line, hated Luis Ramirez. Not a *gringo* killer, nor a back-country, evil-eyed *mestizo,* nor one of his own picked Mex renegades failed to despise this squat, thick-bellied *majordomo* with the pockmarked face, even while they served his interests.

Yet they feared Ramirez and the power he had unaccountably gained.

They still recalled the day he had nineteen men, who had won his dislike, executed by the twelve soldiers of his tiny garrison, proclaiming them to be plotters against the government.

Nothing was ever done about this wholesale murder. Nothing ever could seem to be done against Ramirez.

His power was too great. And as the nineteen blasts of the firing squad were heard that morning at sunrise, Ramirez had stood on the roof of his 'dobe *cantina* and looked down into the execution courtyard, a drunken, leering grin creasing his ugly face.

It was said he had never laughed since.

Now Buck Malone recalled all this about Luis Ramirez as he rode into San Carlos this night. He knew Ramirez. Knew that all the evil said about him was true.

At the tie-rack of the *cantina,* Malone halted his tired bronc, dis-

mounted. He strode stiffly through the batwing doors, through the crowd, up to the bar.

As he ordered a drink from the perspiring bartender he flicked a quick glance through the back mirror.

He saw Luis Ramirez. The fat Mexican *jefe* was sitting at a table in one corner of his *cantina,* staring through the smoke-clouded, foul-smelling barroom at the activity about him.

Ramirez, Buck Malone knew, always sat alone because he trusted no one. Always alone, with his back to the wall, one hand resting on his fat belly near his gun, eyes red, unblinking. A dirty white shirt, open at his fat, hoglike throat, clung to his sweaty chest.

He wore tight-fitting, dirty grey tweed pants that he had bought years ago on his one and only trip north of the Line.

WITHOUT attracting more attention than necessary, Malone glanced at the men who lined the bar on both sides of him.

They were hard-bitten *hombres.* Men of many breeds whose sharp, snaky eyes were always restless. Men with flat-bodied waists of gents who have spent most of their lives in the saddle. Men with cartridge-studded belts sagging with holstered guns about their thighs.

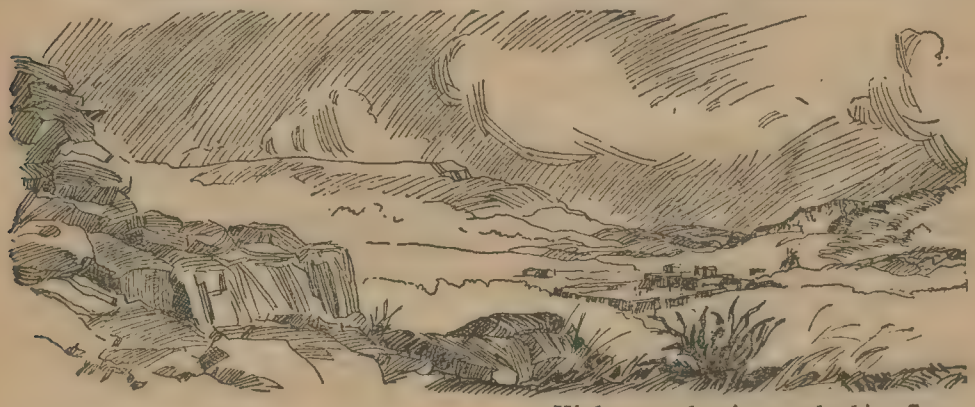
A motley crew, the scum of the Border, where a killing or two never broke the hilarity of the place.

As Malone lifted his whiskey to his lips he smiled grimly. Apparently Ramirez hadn't seen him when he had entered.

Malone was glad of that. He didn't want a showdown with Ramirez — not just yet. He wanted to spot a gent among the *gringos* in that room first who would answer to the name of Wilson.

Then Malone tensed. Some sixth sense jangled a warning to his brain that something was wrong!

He was watching Ramirez through the mirror. The Mexican was looking intently past the crowded poker tables toward a short, bandy-legged gent who had just stepped in through the flapping batwing doors.



High upon the rim overlooking San

Through half-lidded, lazy, bloodshot eyes, Ramirez was looking at the man. The little gent moved unconcernedly to the bar as if to buy a drink.

Malone, back to Ramirez, didn't want to turn around. Didn't want Ramirez to recognize him. Not just yet.

But in the mirror he saw two hard-faced Mexes farther down the bar look at the little *gringo* newcomer, then saw their eyes shuttle questioningly to Ramirez. The Mexican *jefe's* pockmarked, leathery face was expressionless. He merely lifted his glass of *tequila* to his lips and gave a slight nod.

In that tumultuous, crowded barroom no one but Buck Malone seemed to notice the two Mexican gunmen as they eased back from the

bar. If anyone saw them and caught the significance of their movements as they shoved in beside the *gringo,* it was never disclosed.

It was murder! Malone saw that. Felt it.

Ramirez was watching calmly, the trace of a grin on his thick lips. As the little *gringo* tipped his glass to drink, one of the Mexicans jarred against him, cursed. Liquor spilled out of the *gringo's* glass.

HE whirled, hand diving to his gun.

Malone, eyes slits, saw the *gringo* as he caught the meaningful sneer on the Mexican's face. Saw the *gringo* as he spun about, back to the bar, facing the Mex killers confronting him.

Frame-up.

It was as plain as the noses on the swart, cruel faces of the Mexes.

In the flick of an eye, the bar about the three men cleared. But ten feet from them, back still to the barroom, Malone stood, every nerve in his muscle-hardened body taut as a steel wire.

Blatant noises of the dive muted. Men stared. Wide-eyed girls edged back to the corners of the room, fear on their faces. Other renegade *gringos* in the room darted nervous eyes over the room.

But the little *gringo* who was being framed showed no fear. Through hard, close-lidded eyes he saw it all now and his hand moved slowly, sliding his gun back into leather. He must have savvied that when he left that room he'd go feet first.

He must have known that he did not have a chance in a thousand against Ramirez' picked killers who jammed the room.

But he stood cool. Cool as ice.

In the deadly hush the little *gringo* looked across the room at Ramirez who was watching him, thick lips sneering. The *gringo's* voice cracked the silence.

"Still yella, ain't yuh, Ramirez—yuh big, bloated greaser!" he taunted. "Still have to hire yore killin's done, don't yuh?"

Under the stinging insult, Ramirez didn't move. But his thick flab-

Carlos, Buck Malone called a halt

by face went dark with rage which he struggled to control. Then he grinned, but his eyes burned with the red fires of hate.

"You *gringos,*" he purred, "are fonny, no? You have insult me—Luis Ramirez, thee mayor of San Carlos. Eet ees too bad, *gringo*—"

The blood was hammering in Buck Malone's temples. Fury welled up in him at the boldness, the hideousness of this murder drama. He didn't know this *gringo* from any of the others who were in the room.

But the man was white. He had nerve. For some reason Ramirez wanted him killed. That was obvious.

The little *gringo* seemed as if playing for time. A dozen of Ramirez's men snaked their hands gunward. Then the little *gringo* moved.

Cursing, his hand stabbed to his gun.

Unable to restrain himself longer, Buck Malone leaped back from the bar. Leaped back even as his own fists flipped up from his sides, gun-laden.

"Hold it!" he yelled.

Too late came his warning. Gunthunder, deafening in the close confines of the barroom, seemed to shake the very walls. Through a red haze of rage Malone saw the little *gringo* stagger out from the bar and wilt to the floor, his body bullet-ridden.

Malone saw all this even as his own guns blasted lead into the semicircle of Ramirez' massed gunmen.

Men shrieked, cursed. Smoke choked the room. Bedlam reigned in that room of roaring guns, shrieking men—and death.

Yet, strangely enough, Malone came out unscathed though shot after shot had been snapped at his crouched figure. It all happened in the bat of an eye.

Then Ramirez' frenzied, shrilling voice rose above the tumult. The shouting stopped as suddenly as it had begun.

OUT into the center of the room, between his men and Buck Malone, leaped Ramirez, hands waving wildly in the smoke.

"Stop it! Stop it!" Ramirez was screaming. "Stop thees keeling!"

There was the sighing swish of guns sliding back into holsters. One of the breed girls made a terrified hissing sound as she sucked breath into her lungs. Facing Buck Malone now, Ramirez' body was trembling with rage.

He looked for a moment as if he were going to step back and order his men to shoot down Malone then and there. But he didn't. Red eyes full of smoldering hate, he glanced at the bodies of three of his men on the floor. Men put there by Malone's guns.

He looked at the little *gringo's* sprawled, lifeless body. Then he stared, glittering eyes full of calculation, at Buck Malone who was sliding his guns back into leather.

"Buck Malone," Ramirez whispered huskily. "Why do *you* enter into thees trouble. *Dios!*"

In that instant Buck Malone read in Ramirez' eyes the message that told him this Mexican was playing a cunning game.

There was some reason why Ramirez had stopped the gun-play. So Buck Malone decided to play his cards belly-close in this strange game where he had drawn chips.

"You jest had this little *gringo* murdered, Ramirez," said Malone softly, voice icy. "That's something mighty hard to stomach."

Ramirez shrugged his fat shoulders, grinned. "I am the law," he sighed egotistically, speaking in Spanish. "This *hombre* insulted me. In San Carlos that means"—he shrugged again—"death! Take him out, men. It is too bad. I am truly sorry. Come with me, Lopez—you and Guiterrez." He indicated two of his renegades.

The buzz of activity was beginning again. In another minute or two the incident would be forgotten and Ramirez' *cantina* would boom with the lusty noises again.

Ramirez' red eyes centered on Malone's face. "You, Buck Malone," he said purringly, "can either come weeth me or go to thee jail. Wheechever you weesh." He smiled again.

Slowly Buck Malone nodded. His eyes were like slits of blue ice.

"I'll come with yuh, Ramirez," he said. "Let's go."

Ramirez' smile broadened. It wrinkled the pockmarks in his face. He nodded and started to the rear of the room.

Behind him trailed his two renegades. And behind them, boot heels clicking, strode Buck Malone.

All three of them entered a rear door where a sign read: *Oficina*. It was here that Ramirez transacted most of his official business as self-appointed *corregidor*—mayor. Back here in this windowless room, over *tequila* glasses with his two bodyguards ever present, watchful.

Inside the back room Ramirez

The gun in the girl's hand struck down

closed the door. For a moment he listened to the muted sounds of activity as it increased out in the barroom. Then he motioned Buck Malone and his two men to chairs beside a rough-hewn table in the center of the room.

As he sat down he produced a letter which bore the postmark of Coyote Wells. It was addressed to Vera Morgan, Tejanolito *Rancho*, Chihuahua, Mexico.

Under the glow of the bracketed kerosene lamp, Ramirez fingered the letter fondly. The two Mexican *guardas* watched him.

But Ramirez didn't open the letter. He looked at Malone, eyes glittering with cunning.

"Thees letter," he explained, "I know eet by heart. Eet ees from a *gringo* called Cass." Buck Malone's heart skipped a beat. His body gave just the slightest start. But if Rami-

rez or his two men noticed it they didn't show it.

"*Si;* Cass, they call heem. Eet was sent to thee pretty girl, Vera they call her, at thee Tejanolito *Rancho.* In thees letter Cass says he weel cross thee river an' ride to thee *rancho* tonight.

"But I have a frien' on thees *rancho* who gets thees letter first before thee girl. He breengs eet to me. Then me—I send four men to thee river where Cass ees to cross." Ramirez glanced at a clock on the wall. "I had reasons why Cass had to die." He sighed, replaced the envelope in his pocket.

Ramirez liked to talk English, even to his men.

"They weel be here now soon weeth word that Cass ees dead," Ramirez continued. "Then me—my men, you, *Senor* Buck Malone—weel ride to thees *rancho, muy pronto*—on business!"

Ramirez' eyes shone like red coals. He studied Malone's bronzed, inscrutable face calculatingly. He looked at him much like a gent who is examining a horse he is buying.

"I didn't have you killed out there, Malone," said the Mexican *jefe* pointedly, "simply because I can use you—an' your very fast guns. For years you been riding thees river. You been hating me, no? Join me now an' I shall make eet worth your while."

Buck Malone seemed to hesitate. His face was a copper-tanned mask. Then he said:

"Mebbe yuh're right, Ramirez. Mebbe it would be best for me to throw in with yuh."

Ramirez grinned, started to say something. The dull beat of horses' hoofs just behind the building halted him.

He listened, body rigid. Then he leaped to his feet as a side door of the office was flung open.

Four Mexicans, grey with trail dust, stalked into the room. Heavy gun-belts hung from their hips, twin guns in brass-studded holsters.

Ramirez spun about, facing them.

"Well?" he rumbled.

The leader of the four, stained buck teeth protruding in a perpetual grin, nodded.

"It is well, *jefe,*" he said in Spanish. "There was not one man that crossed, but two. We killed them both with many shots."

Ramirez chuckled, eyes glowing with cupidity. "Get together the men!" he snapped. "Thee *gringo* Weelson ees dead. Buck Malone ees weeth me now. *Senora Fortuna* ees weeth me thees night. We are riding to thee Tejanolito *Rancho!*"

CHAPTER III

Gun Stampede

RAMIREZ started to the door to bawl orders to his men in at the bar. The door suddenly burst open in his face. Standing in the threshold was Banker Franz Hartmann, round face flushed.

Buck Malone, who had been standing in the shadows in one corner of the room, froze. Like a puma, crouched, ready to spring, he stood for a split second. Then he eased a step farther back in the gloom. Hartmann, eyes fastened on Ramirez' face, hadn't seem him.

"My mortgage!" panted the banker excitedly. "That mortgage that I buy from you with my goot money—"

His voice rose shrilly.

"Stop eet, Hartmann!" Ramirez rasped. His red-veined eyes narrowed. "Now talk, what you say—sense!"

Rubbing his pudgy hands together, Hartmann waddled hastily inside the room. One of the Mexicans slammed shut the door behind him.

Still Buck Malone didn't move. And still Hartmann hadn't noticed him.

"Ramirez!" blatted Hartmann, "the mortgage I buy from you was stolen from me this night. Two men they walk into my bank with guns and make me give them the mortgage. They—"

"What men, Hartmann?"

"*Gott in Himmel!*" the banker wailed. "Should I know?"

He paced toward the far end of the room agitatedly. Ramirez watched him, eyes glowing with anger and crafty speculation. The two Mex gunmen stared, dark faces expressionless.

Then, at the far end of the room, Hartmann turned. His nervous eyes fluttered over the shadowy room. For the first time he saw Buck Malone.

The two men's eyes were locked. Hartmann's fat-jowled face went white as death, eyes bulging. His lips fluttered apart but no sound came. Ramirez, looking from Malone to the German, snapped perplexedly:

"*Dios!* Now what?"

Shaking finger rising to point accusingly at Malone, the banker screamed:

"There he is!" he shrilled. "There he is—the robber that stoled my mortgage."

Malone took a quick step out of the corner. All eyes in the room were centered on him.

He grinned coolly. It was a desperate chance he had decided to take in that fraction of a second. But there was no choice.

The soft whisper of death seemed to sigh in that tomblike room. One wrong move now and Malone knew his life was the forfeit. Already the hands of the two Mex gunmen were moving to their guns.

"This gent's plumb *loco*, Ramirez," Malone said levelly. "You know I've been here 'most all evening."

It brought another outburst from Hartmann. He waved his arms wildly in the air, pointed again to Malone.

"He lies!" he shrieked. "He lies! He is the thief! He stoled my mortgage."

Ramirez roared, "Quiet, Hartmann!"

For the moment Hartmann became calm. But he still whimpered meaningless, incoherent words. Malone was still grinning when Ramirez must have made his decision then and there.

"I theenk, Malone," he said smoothly, "that Hartmann ees just excited. I pay heem no attention."

Then he turned to Hartmann.

"Thees two men who robbed you thees night are dead, Hartmann. My men just tol' me. You mus' be mistaken about thees man. He ees Buck Malone. He ees weeth me now. *Dios*, why would he want your mortgage?"

Ramirez grinned unpleasantly at the banker who was still standing, making tiny whimpering sounds.

"I have thee idea, Hartmann," Ramirez sighed, eyes glinting with resolve. "Thee mortgage— Well, eet was—what you say—a fraud. Thee ol' *gringo* Randell who owns thee Tejanolito *Rancho* never borrowed money. He makes money. You paid me wan thousan' dollars for eet, no? You want thee *rancho*, but thee mortgage eet ees gone. *Bueno*. I owe you money. Three thousan' no? Thees night we settle thee debt.

"We ride—my *soldados*—you an' me an Malone. We weel ride to thee *rancho*. Because thees *gringo* Randell do not pay me taxes, we weel take thee *rancho*. You, Hartmann," he grinned wolfishly, "my men they weel drive thee herd north of thee Rio *por* you. My debt weeth you ees square. You get thee cattle—me, I get thee *rancho*." Ramirez spread his fat hands magnanimously.

BANKER HARTMANN stared. His thick-jowled face brightened. It must have sounded good to Hartmann. It was a chance to make some big money quick. And his shrewd, money-mad brain wasn't slow to see it.

Yet there was distrust in his eyes. He looked dubiously at Malone. He didn't like the gleam in Ramirez' eyes. Yet—

"Well—" Hartmann mumbled, indecision in his voice.

Ramirez's eyes hardened. "That ees thee only way you get your money I owe you, Hartmann."

Hartmann's face paled. "Well, we will go," he said quickly, rubbing

his hands together. "We will go. I am ready."

Ramirez grinned unpleasantly. As Hartmann turned his back, the Mex *jefe* winked at his two gunmen and Buck Malone.

"You still ready to ride weeth me, Malone?" he smiled.

"Ready, Ramirez," Malone said softly.

Ramirez nodded, and with Buck Malone, Hartmann and the two Mex gunmen, he swaggered out into the barroom again to prepare his men for the ride to the Tejanolito *Rancho.*

THIRTY minutes later that night a cavalcade of horsemen roared out of the town of San Carlos. At the head of the riders was Luis Ramirez, lashing his big steed with a quirt. About the Mexican's fat belly now were two cartridge belts, holstered guns at each hip.

Behind Ramirez rode the banker from Coyote Wells, Franz Hartmann, fat body filling the Mexican kak, both hands clutching the horn. The German's face looked like a white round ball.

Just behind him, stiff-backed in the saddle, tight-lipped, rode Buck Malone who didn't take his eyes off Ramirez who rode in the lead. And behind him raced at least twenty Mexican renegades in cone-shaped *sombreros,* bandoliers about their shoulders, guns at their hips.

Ramirez' men. Killers!

Buck Malone's right hand slid to his hip pocket. The folded mortgage was still there. There were a lot of things Buck Malone couldn't *sabe.*

Ramirez had explained several things about the mortgage. Still he couldn't understand what the tie-up was between Cass and this gent Randell who owned the Tejanolito *Rancho.*

Cass had never mentioned Randell. In all the years Buck Malone had ridden the back-trails along the river with Cass no explanation had ever been offered by either about their pasts.

No questions had been asked. Their actions had spoken louder than words. And during those years a true bond of friendship had been built between these two men that exists only between men who know the meaning of lonely nights, trailing posses, and long hard rides.

Now Buck Malone cursed bitterly when he recalled he had left Cass down along the Rio, wounded, probably dying—in the hands of the sheriff's posse. Well, he'd find out a lot of things soon, Malone decided grimly. Then there'd be hell!

Out of San Carlos raced the rider band, in an easterly direction toward the Tejanolito Ranch ten miles away. Overhead a red moon peeped from behind white cloud banks. Pale moonlight cast a nebulous grey gloom over the entire desert country. In their wake clouds of dust rose skyward in the sultry night air.

In the lead, Ramirez's crimson-tinged eyes glowed like a lobo's on the trail. Like his men he wore a broad-brimmed, silver-trimmed *sombrero* that cast a dark shadow over his evil, pocked face.

Just ahead of him, clinging to the saddle horn, Malone looked at Hartmann as the German jarred and bounced to the motion of his horse. Hartmann wasn't accustomed to riding and he was struggling to maintain his balance. Behind Malone drummed the hoofs of the Mex renegades' horses.

Malone urged his bronco forward at a faster pace. He pulled up beside Ramirez as Hartmann yelled at them. Malone twisted around, looked back. The German was wobbling in the kak, almost spilling, but still managing to stay aboard.

Ramirez heard him yell, but he didn't take his eyes off the dark trail ahead.

"Ramirez!" yelled Hartmann again, voice rising above the drum of hoofs. "What'll we do—with old Randell? He'll—"

There was anxiety, fear—in his voice. But Ramirez didn't answer him. As they topped a rise, Ramirez lifted his right hand for a halt.

Sweat-streaked horses slid to bunch-footed halt in the soft sand, then stood snorting, prancing nervously.

All eyes centered on Ramirez as he turned his bronc about and faced Hartmann who was still clutching the saddle horn in utter exhaustion.

Ramirez, lips curling with contempt, looked from him to Buck Malone, then studied Hartmann's face that showed ghastly white in the moonlight.

"Thees *rancho,*" Ramirez said oilily, "is just wan mile ahead. You steel remember thee deal, Hartmann?" His voice was strangely soft.

Hartmann panting, nodded. "*Ja,* Ramirez," he said eagerly. He looked uncertainly at Malone, then again to Ramirez. "You get the ranch an' I—I get the herd. But, *Himmel*—what'll we do with old Randell and the girl?"

For palpitant seconds, Ramirez didn't answer. Just grinned, yellow teeth shining in the pale light. The fingers of his right hand drummed on the saddle horn.

"I am afraid there ees a meestake, Hartmann."

Sensing the mocking note in the Mexican's voice, Hartmann's eyes flew wide with apprehension. He looked at the cold stares of the renegade killers. Looked quickly, appealingly at Buck Malone's stony face.

Horror spread over his face. Horror and panic as the significance of Ramirez' words took meaning.

"*Gott* — Ramirez!" he gulped. "What is wrong?"

Red eyes bright with killer's lust, Ramirez watched the stark terror etch the German's face.

"Leesen, Hartmann. Jus' my men, Malone and me are riding on. We shall keel Randell. I shall take thee *rancho,* thee herd and—thee girl! Thees money I owe you"—Ramirez shrugged—"eet shall be settled now —once and for all."

Before Malone could halt him, Ramirez' hand made a slithering smooth motion. Down. Up. A gun barrel glittered in the moonlight. Then a pencil-shaped red flame bit the gloom as it leaped out from the muzzle of Ramirez' six-gun, and gun-thunder blended with Hartmann's hideous shriek.

Horror on his features, the German toppled from the kak, made a thudding noise as he hit the soft sand. He didn't move. His horse lunged to one side.

Through the wreathing gunsmoke, Ramirez looked at his men. He slowly sheathed his gun and turned to Malone whose eyes were full of condemnation, whose hand was splayed over the butt of one of his guns.

"Some *gringos* hate to die," Ramirez purred in Spanish. "It is too bad Franz Hartmann had to die. He wanted to gamble but was afraid to lose. You're not afraid to die, are you, Malone?"

"Damn yuh, Ramirez!" Malone gritted, voice hate-filled. "Yuh kill fer the love of it. I ain't used to that, fella."

RAMIREZ grinned. But it was mirthless. "Forget eet, Malone," he soothed. "Your guns are mine now. You are weeth me. I'll make eet worth your while. Or"—he shrugged —"maybe you weel die, too, like Hartmann—"

Malone, lips tight, said nothing more. But he read in the Mexican's eyes that it was only a matter of time until he would be forced to a showdown. Ramirez was playing a game, too.

"Okay, Ramirez," hummed Malone. "Okay."

Without looking down again at the outflung, motionless body of Hartmann, Ramirez raked his bronc's sides with his cruel, long-shanked spurs. The rider band surged forward again, this time Malone riding by the side of the Mexican chief.

Not a member of Ramirez' band had batted an eye at the killing. Strange thing about a Mexican. A punch in the jaw will make him scream in terror. But he'll stride arrogantly out to face the blazing

rifles of a firing squad as calmly as if he were walking out to saddle his bronc.

Now across the mesquite-studded mesa that lay ahead of them in the dim moon-glow, the lighted window of a ranchhouse twinkled brightly. Outbuildings and corral fences were discernible in the background. Ramirez pointed to the light, shot his bronc at a short-cut toward the house.

In a staccato beat of racing hoofs the renegade band wheeled their broncs to a halt at the portico of the low 'dobe ranchhouse.

They hit dirt on a run, drawing guns as they ran forward on foot. Twenty feet from the portico the Mexicans with Malone and Ramirez at their head halted.

Malone, gun in his fist, looked at Ramirez. "What now?" he asked softly. "What—"

"Wait!" whispered the Mexican. "We'll—"

Ramirez said no more. The front door of the house was suddenly flung open. In the threshold, outlined in the yellow light from an oil lamp in the room behind him, stood an old man, shotgun raised menacingly. His long mustache and hair were almost white.

He peered through the gloom at the dim outlines of the raiders creeping up on him.

"Stop, damn yuh, Ramirez!" rapped the old man tremulously. "I can see yuh! Stop belly-crawlin' along like the dam' snake yuh are and talk 'fore I blast yore soul to hell! What do yuh want this time uh night?"

Jaws clamped, Buck Malone waited for no more. Ramirez was going to murder this old man! Snarling an oath, Malone crouched, leaped upon the portico. Then whirled, guns covering the surprised Ramirez and his killer band.

"No yuh don't, Ramirez!" Malone barked bitterly. "Yore killin's are over. Hartmann was right. I *am* the gent that stole the mortgage—that rode with Cass! Now begin shootin'!"

The startled hissing sound in Ramirez' throat died. Blasting gunfire ripped the silence. Red flames from the gun muzzles licked out toward Malone and the old man in the doorway even as Malone threw himself down and to one side.

Somewhere in the front room a girl screamed, voice terror-filled. Vaguely, Malone was aware of his gun spewing, bucking in his hand. He heard the shotgun boom as the oldster pitched forward to his face, riddled by the bullets from the Mex guns.

Lead ripped all around Malone in a deadly hail. A hot, searing pain stabbed his side. Cursing, he literally hurled himself over the body of the old man, into the front room of the house. He glimpsed a terrified girl bending over a couch. There was a man on the couch. He looked as if he were dead.

It was Cass!

Malone saw it all in that frenzied split-second of thundering guns, choking smoke and shrieking, blood-crazed Mexes who were already jamming in through the door like cattle stampeding. Facing them, Malone's guns blazed twice more. Mexes, faces distorted with pain, stumbled, went down in crazy heaps.

Then Malone's guns clicked—empty!

He yelled a warning to the girl. Too late, he saw the rifle butt in the hands of one of the Mexes flashing down through the air.

Then a thousand lights crackled in Malone's brain and he knew no more.

CHAPTER IV

Prisoners

FROM a swirling black void, Buck Malone was swept back to consciousness. He blinked open his eyes, stifling a groan as the pain in his head almost blinded him.

For a moment he lay still, collecting his thoughts, trying to recall all that had happened. It all

came to him then—the fight at the ranch.

He cursed inwardly. No sound left his lips. He was gagged, bound hand and foot.

Muted noises stung his ears. He twisted, tried to look about him. He saw then in the dim light of the kerosene lamp that he was a prisoner in one of the back rooms of Ramirez' *cantina*.

Then he started. At one end of the room, bound and gagged, the girl he had seen at the ranch was lying on an old sofa. Her eyes, reflecting anxiety and rage, were looking at him over the dirty rag that was about her mouth.

Malone tried to nod encouragingly to her. Then he saw the body of a man whose eyes were closed, whose shirt was crimson-stained, torn back, revealing a bandage about his shoulder.

Malone squinted, hardly daring to believe his eyes. It was Cass! Cass—thonged hand and foot!

Malone cursed chokingly, tore at the bonds that were cutting his wrists. But he might as well have been in a steel vise. He tensed, lay still.

Somebody was at the door which led out into the bar. Ramirez, a black bottle in one hand, swaggered unsteadily into the room and closed the door. The noises and drunken voices in at the bar seemed to be growing louder. It sounded as if these killers of Ramirez' were celebrating.

Now Ramirez, his red eyes gloating, stood on wide-spread legs inside the room and looked at his prisoners. He looked long at Buck Malone, grinned triumphantly.

"Well," he smirked drunkenly. "You're not dead yet, my brave son of a *perro!*"

Ramirez threw back his head and laughed. He drank gurglingly from the bottle, then looked down at Malone whose eyes were seething with hate.

"Can't talk back to me, can you, Malone?" he taunted. "Well, I'll tell you what we are doing. *Que diablos!* We come back to town to celebrate. I wake up thee sleepy ones. I call in thee girls. We dreenk thee finest wines. I breeng een thee *musicos*. There ees wine, women, song. Before thees night ees finish there weel be fights. Men weel die. Die like you weel soon. Knives weel flash and guns weel spit. Blood weel run like the red wine. But *a quien lo interesa?* Who cares?"

Ramirez laughed again. Then his eyes switched to the girl.

His lingering, greedy gaze roved over her beautifully curved body. He licked his thick, dry lips. Sweat beaded his forehead.

Malone watched him move toward her. Watched him as he stooped and untied the thongs that bound her.

HANDS free now, the girl jerked the dirty rag from about her face. It had been choking her. Her breast heaved, eyes filled with loathing.

"You—you devil!" she spat vehemently. "You greasy beast!"

Hands over his fat belly, Ramirez laughed again, swaying on his wide-spread feet.

"*Caramba*, pretty one," he breathed huskily. "You are wild. You fight and scratch like thee cat. But eet ees for no need. Your frien' Cass shall die when he wakes up. Thee ol' Randell ees dead. Thee peeg Hartmann ees dead. Thee Tejano-lito *Rancho* ees mine and the cattle belong to me. I am reech! You are mine! Even when thee sun comes up thees brave *pistolero*, Buck Malone, shall die too!"

A gasp of surprise escaped the girl's lips. She flung a quick glance at Malone, then back to Ramirez.

"Buck—*Buck Malone?*" Her voice was hopeful.

"*Si*, he ees Buck Malone," Ramirez taunted, pointing to Malone lying helpless on the floor. "Know heem, do you? Eet weel soon be dawn, then my *soldados* of thee garrison weel stan' heem and thees Cass up to thee 'dobe wall. Buck Malone—he ees a *bandido* een my countree."

Ramirez' thick voice was exultant. In his drunkenness he didn't see the sudden gleam of decision flick into the girl's eyes. In his conceit he was too sure of himself.

But Malone saw it. And he held his breath, every nerve in his body tingling.

The girl suddenly looked past the *majordomo's* shoulder—stared at the door, eyes widening. Ramirez saw her, whirled.

Like a puma she leaped straight at his bloated belly, head down, plunging like a ram. Cursing, Ramirez spun back again, hands flinging out defensively.

Her shoulder struck Ramirez at the waist; staggered him.

He jackknifed, a howl of pain rising in his throat that died in a groan. Blinded with pain he struck down with both fists. As the blows fell on the girl's back, her right hand made a slithering motion to the Mexican's holstered gun.

She fell to the floor, bounded back to her feet in a crouch as Ramirez lunged at her, snarling blasphemy in Spanish. The gun she had snatched from his holster leveled.

"Stop, you snake!" she panted venomously. "Don't come closer and don't yell—you greaser—or I'll shoot you!" Her voice wasn't that of a helpless girl now. It crackled with determination.

Ramirez stared bewilderedly. His dark, sweaty face was ashen.

"*Dios!*" he husked, voice choked with passion. "The *pistola*—I forgot heem—"

"Yes, Ramirez, you forgot your gun."

She moved a menacing step toward him. Fear leaped into Ramirez' eyes. He seemed to forget Buck Malone who was watching them, eyes bright with hope, admiration for the girl. Only fear showed in Ramirez' eyes as he stared at this girl who had demonstrated she knew how to use a six-gun—and would.

The pretty *gringo* girl who was so helpless just a moment ago had turned out to be a bundle of wildcat fury.

Hands slowly elevating to his shoulders, Ramirez goggled at the advancing girl.

"*Madre de Dios!*" he gasped. "If I mus' die, shoot me here—" frantically he tapped his forehead "not—not in thee belly! But you'll die eef you do! My men, they weel keel you, too, when they hear thee shot—"

The girl smiled her contempt as she stopped in front of him. She flung one quick glance at Buck Malone, then looked at the Mexican. "Turn around," she ordered curtly. "Face the door!"

Ramirez, hope lighting his eyes, turned. But his hope was short-lived. The gun in the girl's hand whipped up. Then down, swiftly.

Steel struck flesh and bone, making a dull, crunching sound. Like a pole-axed steer Ramirez wilted. His heavy body made a thumping noise as he struck the floor.

The girl's face whitened. She looked from the unconscious form of Ramirez to Buck Malone. Then she raced to Malone's side and began tearing at the bonds that held him.

"I—I had to do it," she cried softly. "I—"

ALREADY somebody was hammering on the door. These would be the Mex's killers. They must have heard Ramirez' body when it thumped to the floor. Frantically the girl worked at the ropes around Malone's wrists.

"You—you don't know me, Buck, but I know you," she told him. "He—Cass told me about you. Maybe we can make it yet!"

Buck Malone felt the strands that bound him tear loose. Ripping the rag from about his mouth he came to his feet, kicked out of the ropes that were around his ankles.

Leaping to the door he threw the heavy latch into place, locking it, even as the hammering fists on the door grew louder. Blatant voices were demanding admittance.

Buck Malone whirled, faced the

girl. The next he knew she was in his arms, crying softly. It was just as natural as if they had clasped hands. Yet this girl was a total stranger to Buck Malone.

For a second he forgot the howling of Ramirez' mob at the door. Forgot Cass lying unconscious on the floor. Forgot Ramirez' crumpled body.

All he knew was that this beautiful girl was in his arms, that he was whispering encouraging words to her.

His mind was clicking with split-second rapidity. He took the gun from her hand, swept her behind him just as the door splintered and crashed in toward them.

Crouching, eyes blazing, lips snarling Buck Malone flipped the hammers of the six-gun. One of the massed, drunken Mexicans in the doorway shrieked in mortal agony.

Then the gun clicked—empty!

CHAPTER V

The Thunder of Hoofs

He met them as they poured in at him. They shrieked, screamed, poured into the room like a terrible black tide. Like mighty driving pistons, Malone's fists shot out. His broad, powerful shoulders rippled with muscles, shed the rifle butts as if they had been matches.

Like a raging bull he towered over the scrambling, thrusting mass of bodies that were trying to tear him down. Blood streaked his face, blinded him. He heard the girl behind him cry out warningly, whirled, caught a rifle barrel in his big hands as it lashed down at his head.

Vaguely he was aware that Ramirez had come to, was on his feet, fighting like a groggy, insane man.

Malone was using the rifle as a club, whirling it in a deadly circle above his head. It swished, whistled, even above the howling mob. Heads cracked. Bodies lay strewn about the room. Still more Mexicans rushed in.

Chest heaving, his shirt torn by a dozen knife thrusts, Buck Malone fought like a mighty stallion that wouldn't go down.

Twice he lurched forward, almost losing his balance. And twice he jerked straight his huge frame and yelled for more.

"Come and git it—yuh yella-bellied greasers!" he boomed above the bedlam.

It seemed for a moment as if Buck Malone might win. But like a huge black tidal wave they swept over him, howling their triumphant cries of victory.

A dozen arms gripped Malone's arms and legs, pinning him out eagle fashion, helpless, making further struggling impossible. Hot blood in his eyes blinded him. But above the din he heard the girl's sobbing cry as she called his name.

Sweaty bodies smothered her. Her arms were clamped down at her sides. Hot breaths laden with *tequila* nauseated her.

Ramirez, dark face wet with blood and sweat, pushed his way up to the girl's side, shrilling for order. Groans of the wounded filled the air as panting men stopped shouting and cursing. Ramirez leaned closer to the girl so he could discern her features in the dim light.

He grinned leeringly.

"Ah, my ver' preety wan," he crowed. Such fighters as you an' your frien'! Eet ees too bad I mus' see you die. But thees ees Mexico. You and your two frien's do not obey our laws. I thought I might keep *you*—" He shrugged his fat shoulders regretfully. "But, *Dios*, you cannot be tamed!"

Breast heaving, face white as death, the girl just looked at him, eyes blazing with defiance and hate.

"All right, rat," she hissed. "Get it over with. I'm calling your bluff."

But Buck Malone, lying helpless on the floor, senses reeling, heard and knew Ramirez wasn't bluffing. Not that Buck didn't admire the

girl's gameness. He did. But he knew that there would be three of them to face the firing squad now: himself, Cass and this strange girl who had tried to help him.

"I'm ready—you—murderer!" Her voice was cold and steady.

A faint glimmer of admiration shone momentarily in Ramirez' eyes. Then he turned, snapped curt orders in Spanish to his men. They straightened to attention, a bedraggled group of a dozen men in peaked *sombreros* and the tattered uniforms of the garrison's *soldados*.

Rifle butts clattered to the floor. The men crouching over Buck Malone's big frame lifted him bodily to his feet. He blinked the blood from his eyes, looked back at the pallid-faced girl and the unconscious form of Cass who was being carried out of the room.

He smiled grimly at the girl. The undaunted fighting spirit of this nervy girl made the blood surge through his veins with pride. He knew she was of the fighting frontier stock that never knew what quit meant, even though the odds might be stacked against her.

Ramirez strode past the group of men who held Buck Malone. At the doorway he looked back to snap another command.

"Hurry up, greaser," Malone jeered. "It's kinda turnin' my stomach lookin' at yuh. How's yore head?"

RAMIREZ ignored the insult. He rapped out his orders in clipped Spanish. The soldiers marched in single file out the door past him. The men holding Buck Malone and the girl pushed the two prisoners through the door, past Ramirez, out through the barroom where all was quiet again.

Mexicans in the room watched the strange procession march out the batwing doors, into the night, on their way to the *calabozo*. Their eyes showed no emotion. Their faces were like images. They just stared.

The blasting shots of the firing squad that would come at dawn was not new to them. It meant death for these *Americanos*. But death in Mexico means nothing. Anyhow, they shrugged, these were *gringos*—

It was the heavy gloom before dawn as they marched down the main street of San Carlos on their way to the thick-walled 'dobe jail. In another hour it would be dawn. They would be stood against the bullet-scarred execution wall.

Ramirez would look at them, and grin. Then he would give one brief command and they would die. Ramirez would shrug.

Buck Malone knew all this. Yet in some strange way it didn't seem to matter to him. He was thinking of this girl who had tried to help him. Thinking of her—and Cass, who had never gained consciousness to learn of their fate.

At the jail the three prisoners were shoved into the gloomy bullpen. The place was vile. The grated iron door was slammed clankingly shut. Ramirez issued an order to the *soldado* on guard, then left.

Malone was glad. He wanted to talk to the girl, to be left alone. He turned to Cass who had been laid on a crude cot. Cass, face white as a corpse, was breathing evenly. Kneeling beside the bed was the girl.

She looked from Cass up to Malone.

"Is—is he all right?" she asked tremulously.

"He's all right," said Malone. "Just out for a time from losin' so much blood. He's all right."

The girl nodded, rose to her feet. Malone saw her eyes were filled with tears that she could restrain no longer.

"It'll be dawn soon," she said. "I guess it doesn't matter much."

Malone didn't want to look at her then. He looked away and nodded. "Yeah, it'll soon be dawn. Yuh're not afraid, are yuh, honey?"

"I'm not afraid, Buck."

She tried to smile. There wasn't a sign of fear about her. They fell

silent for a moment. Then Buck Malone said:

"How did yuh know my name. What were you doing out at the ranch. Why was Cass there?"

"Cass—Cass is my brother, Buck," she said evenly. "His name is Cass Morgan. My name is Vera Morgan. One night he slipped out to our ranch—the Tejanolito, which was owned by my uncle. He told me all about you—how—how wonderful you were. He'd hoped sometime—sometime you wouldn't be riding the —the back-trails. He wrote me that he was coming to the ranch last night. We were in trouble. Ramirez had threatened to take the ranch. But this—this Mexican murderer tried to kill you and Cass at the river. He killed my uncle—"

Her voice trembled now. She bit her lips to keep back the tears.

"I kind of hate to die now, Buck. I—I believe," she whispered, "I love you—"

FOR once in his life, Buck Malone could think of nothing to say. These simple, candid words the girl had spoken expressed his own thoughts perfectly.

"Kinda funny," he finally managed. "I was just thinkin' the same thing—Vera. Seems like I've known yuh a long, long time."

And as Buck Malone took the girl into his arms he understood a lot of things. He knew now why Cass had wanted the mortgage on the ranch that had been in Hartmann's possession. He, Buck, still had the mortgage in his pocket.

But it was too late. The game was lost. Happenings of the night though were pushed into the background now as he held this beautiful girl in his arms there in the darkness of the Mexican prison cell.

Then, suddenly, Malone seemed to come to his senses. He released the girl, teeth gritted, eyes blazing with determination.

"Vera," he whispered tensely. "What the devil's the matter with me! We can't give up yet! We're not whipped yet, honey. I'm gittin' outa here some way—goin' for help before the sun peeps up—"

A man's voice stopped him.

"Yuh can't make it, Buck. They'd kill yuh if yuh did happen to git out!"

Cass said it. Buck spun around, surprised, facing white-faced Cass who had regained consciousness and had pulled himself up to a sitting position, listening to them. Vera Morgan gave a glad little cry, ran to him.

"We're sunk, Buck," said Cass, grinning crookedly.

Buck Malone's mind was racing. Trying to formulate some desperate plan that might mean his escaping and going for help.

"I left the sheriff and his men at the river where we crossed," Cass continued. "When I explained to him why we had stuck up the bank and all that had happened he said he'd wait there the rest of the night in case we needed him. Now," he said bitterly, "we need him and can't git to him."

"Wait, Cass," Malone whispered. Measured foot-beats of the guard on the stone floor in the dark corridor outside their cell stung their ears. "I got a plan! It'll work—mebbe. You take care of Vera!"

Malone stepped hastily to the iron-barred door. *"Só, guarda!"* he called gruffly. *"Llega aqui* — come here."

The footsteps halted just outside the iron door where Malone was gripping the bars. The dim outline of a uniformed guard with a rifle at his side stood there, peering in at the prisoners, grinning toothily.

Every muscle in Malone's big body was taut as a steel wire. He knew behind him in the cell Vera Morgan and Cass were watching, breaths bated.

Malone watched the guard's suspicious eyes.

"I want a smoke, guard," Malone growled in Spanish. "A gent oughta smoke before he's killed."

Outside, the guard laughed softly. He leaned closer, head almost against the bars, sneeringly. "You'll

get all the smoke you want in another hour," he taunted in Mex. "*Madre de Dios,* you'll—"

Too late the guard must have realized he had erred in coming so close to the barred door. Out through the bars shot both of Malone's strong arms, quick as streaked lightning, grabbing the Mexican back of the neck. Then a mighty jerk forward.

The howl of surprise that rose in the guard's throat died in a groan as his head smashed sickeningly into the iron bars. He wilted in Malone's viselike grip.

Malone's left hand flew into the pockets of the man's drab uniform. He found a huge ring of keys. He jingled through them, found one that unlocked their cell door, then dropped the unconscious guard to the floor. Fumblingly, he managed to unlock the door from the outside.

THE heavy door creaked as it opened. Malone didn't take time to ascertain whether the guard's brief outcry had been heard by the guards that were undoubtedly at the outside jail door. He grabbed up the man's body, pulled him quickly into the dark cell. Cass was by Malone's side now, helping him.

"Turn yore head, Vera," Malone whispered quickly. "I'm changin' clothes with this spiggoty and gittin' outa here for help. It was plumb easy. He fell for that old trick like a hobbled hoss. We're leavin' this hotel, folks—"

"Let me go, Buck!" Cass snapped. "Yuh ain't got one chance in a thousand of makin' it. I—"

"Shut up, Cass!" Buck grinned. "Yuh'd look like hell in this uniform—"

"We'll make a run for it, Buck—all of us," pleaded Vera Morgan. "Maybe—"

"Not a chance, Vera, honey! They'd shoot us down the minute we got to the door. This way—me goin' out as the guard, mebbe they won't figger anything's wrong."

Cass cursed softly, anxiously, beneath his breath. All the time Malone was switching clothes with the unconscious guard. The change made, Malone leaped to the cell door that had been left ajar.

He grabbed up the guard's rifle that had been laying in the corridor. Then shutting the door again he took one last glance at Cass and Vera in the cell. In that brief second he saw tears in the girl's eyes. Cass' white face was like chiseled stone, but his eyes were soft.

"See yuh soon, folks!" Buck breathed, trying to grin.

"Careful — Buck —" Vera Morgan murmured, a dry sob in her throat. "Careful!"

Cass said something. Malone didn't wait to hear what it was. Already he was marching down the corridor, toward the front door, rifle on his shoulder. The broad-brimmed *sombrero* he had taken off the guard, he pulled lower over his eyes.

It was dark in the corridor. Pitchy dark.

He got almost to the open front door. He saw two guards with rifles at their sides. One was on each side of the door. The guards had heard him coming. They turned, looked through the darkness toward him.

Beyond them, in the darkness of the street, Malone saw two saddled broncs — evidently the guards' broncs. Saw that in another hour it would be daylight.

Ten feet from the two men, Malone halted.

"*Psst!*" he called hoarsely. Then he gruffed in Mex, "*Diablos!* One of these *gringo* pigs says he is dying. I must tell Ramirez. You two come back and watch. *Andale!*"

Malone held his breath for an instant, waiting.

The guards seemed to hesitate, then grumbling, they strode past him, down the dark corridor toward the cell where Vera Morgan and Cass were still prisoners.

Malone waited for no more. Rifle gripped in front of him like a charging soldier, he sprinted out the front door of the *calabozo.* He hit leather in one leap, grabbed up

reins. The bronc lunged forward, Malone hugging his neck.

Inside the jail a Mexican yelled. Malone grinned crookedly. That would be one of the guards. Farther down the street the batwing doors of Ramirez' saloon banged open.

Shots ripped out in the shadowy gloom. Out in the street now the two guards were blazing away at Malone's retreating figure with their Mausers. Lead kicked up tiny spurts of dust about the flying hoofs of Malone's bronc.

But Malone, on the outskirts of the town now, heading for the river, rose in the stirrups and looked back.

"I'm comin' back, Ramirez!" he gritted furiously. "Comin' back killin'!"

But his voice was lost in the roar of the wind and the thunder of hoofs. He groaned, muttered a prayerful curse. In the eastern sky the faintest rays of grey were already daubing the darkness of the heavens.

CHAPTER VI

The Firing Squad

ON the trail that led out of San Carlos to the Tejanolito *Rancho*, Franz Hartmann, the banker, hadn't died. In his hurry to get to the ranch, Ramirez' aim hadn't been as good as he had intended. When Hartmann toppled unconscious from the kak, Ramirez had erred in leaving him for dead.

The German's body lay sprawled in the sand beside the dark, brush-hemmed trail while Ramirez and his renegades hurried to the ranch. A growing crimson splotch stained the side of the German's shirt just above the belt. From a deep bullet gash across his temple, blood trickled into the sand.

He groaned. One short leg straightened out. Then his eyes opened—wide.

Dazedly, he blinked, sat up, a startled cry of dismay leaving his lips. His pudgy hand jerked to his stomach as if to stop the knife-thrusting pain.

In a sudden fit of frenzy he clambered to his feet, hands out in front of him groping into the darkness, sobs of anguish and pain frothing from his lips.

In falling from his horse he had lost his thick-lensed glasses. Now his terrified eyes could discern nothing in the darkness. He started to run, stumbled and fell, cried out. On the ground his clutching hands dropped big handfuls of sand to claw at his face.

"Gott!" he sobbed. *"Gott*—I'm dying—" His voice died a hopeless wail.

Near him sounded the warning hiss of a rattler. Hartmann shrank back, shrieking. Then as he lay on the ground panting, the rapid drum of a horse's hoofs reached his ears. The hoof-clatter came closer, seemed to be tearing down on him.

Hartmann blinked. He started to scream, but checked himself.

He flopped back motionless in the sand, biting back groans between tight lips as the pain in his stomach seemed like the thrust of a dagger. He gritted his teeth, closed his eyes to the torturous throb of his pain-racked body.

The hammer of hoofs came closer, almost on him now. Unable to stand it longer, Hartmann leaped awkwardly to his feet.

"Help me!" he shrilled hoarsely. "I'm dying—!"

The lone horseman reined in his tearing, lathered bronc. It was Buck Malone. In a dim haze Hartmann saw him, saw the Mexican *soldado* uniform Malone was wearing and screamed in terror.

"Shut up, Hartmann!" Malone rapped tightly. There's a bronc standin' over there! Git him. We're ridin' to the river!"

Wildly, thick lips mumbling guttural, incoherent words, Hartmann must have understood. He stumbled through the darkness. Catclaw, thorny mesquite tore at his clothes, cut his legs, making him cry out

anew each time. Like a blind man he stumbled on across the wasteland of sand and brush.

Suddenly the German halted. The horse Malone had pointed out to him whinnied close by. Desperate, crazy hope flicked over the banker's pain-distorted features. He moved cautiously forward, hands outstretched, whispering pleading words.

He was at his horse's side now. It was the bronc he had been riding when Ramirez had shot him out of the saddle. Hartmann cried out elatedly, pulled himself into the kak, cursing, laughing, groaning like a maniac. His near-sighted vision could barely make out the horse beneath him. All around him it was black, blurry.

Malone, eyes pinpoints of hate, watched the German. When he saw the German was in the saddle, he jammed home spurs and roared past him.

"Come on, Heinie!" he yelled. "Yuh're goin' to the river with me!"

Hartmann's bronc leaped forward at the heels of Malone's racing horse. The German swayed dizzily, round, bare head bobbling crazily on his slumped shoulders.

BABBLING curses drooled from his lips to be lost in the hammering hoofs. He cursed Luis Ramirez. Cursed the day the Mexican was born. Howled blasphemy at the gloom about him. At times he would almost topple from the saddle, then with desperate efforts, he'd pull himself erect again.

But Malone, eyes fixed on the trail ahead, didn't look back. He could hear Hartmann's bronc tearing along behind him. But Malone was thinking of other things besides the welfare of the German banker.

Across the mesquite-dotted desert he was tearing at a mile-eating pace. Then he came to the river, splashed out into the water, his winded bronc's hoofs chopping furiously.

On the north shore, in the dim shadows, Malone saw horsemen urging their broncs out into the water to meet him. He saw a star glitter on the vests of one of the men. The sheriff! He had waited!

"Sheriff Danner!" yelled Malone. "They got Cass—his sister! I'll give myself up. I'm Buck Malone. But right now yuh gotta help! Hartmann here will talk!"

"Yeah, I'm takin' Hartmann in, too!" the lawman rapped. "I'm—"

"Wait!" the German croaked. "*Himmel*—I'm dying! I'll talk—the truth will I tell—"

And, Malone hurrying him on, Hartmann babbled his confession in jerky, hasty words. He spared no truth. He told of the fraudulent mortgage which he had bought from Luis Ramirez with hopes of getting possession of the famed Tejanolito *Rancho* just south of the Line. He told of the bank holdup earlier that night, his ride to San Carlos, his joining up with Ramirez' murderous band. Then how Ramirez had shot him on the way to the ranch to kill old Randell.

Grim-lipped, silent through it all, the sheriff and his men listened. They didn't see the wound in the side of the German's fat stomach or they might have wondered how he had lived so long. They didn't wait to ask why Malone was wearing the uniform of a Mexican soldier. Or why he still gripped the rifle in his hands.

"Now hurry, Sheriff!" Malone snapped. "They're executin' Cass and his sister at dawn. It's damned near that now!"

"It all tallies, boys," Sheriff Danner sang out, "with what this gent Cass told us. Stay here with Hartmann, Red. Take him over there on the bank and dress his wounds. The rest of you gun-dogs come on. Law or no law, we're crossin' this damned Rio and takin' Ramirez' hell hole apart—piece by piece!"

"Come on!" yelled Malone, waving the rifle above his head.

He was already jamming spurs, heading back over the trail he had just come. Behind him came Danner and his lawmen. While back at the river bank, Hartmann toppled weakly from the kak into the arms

of the deputy who had been left to care for him.

The eastern sky was grey now, streaked with crimson flashes of dawn as Buck Malone and the sheriff's posse roared across the brushy lowlands in the direction of San Carlos. They drew rein for nothing in that mad race. Over washes, down steep cutbanks, sparks flying as shod hoofs struck stones.

Through squinted eyes, Malone saw the upper tip of the red morning sun peep up over the eastern rim of the Sierras. He cursed through tight lips, lashed his foam-flecked bronc to greater speed. Like a wild cossack he rode, leaning over the neck of his horse, waving his Mauser in the air.

"Kill yore hosses, yuh sons of hell!" he shouted. "If we're too late!" His words were drowned in the mighty thunder of hoofs.

They topped a rise that overlooked the desert valley spreading out in panorama beneath them, bathed now in the early morning light. Far down there lay the sprawled 'dobe settlement known as San Carlos. Like ants, men were moving down the main street.

That posse of bleak-eyed, grim-lipped law-dogs of the Border rode hell-bent down into the valley with Malone at their head.

As they neared the tiny settlement, Malone led the way down an arroyo. They roared on. Then over a cutbank to their right they could see the long low jail building with its barred windows.

Malone's right hand shot skyward for a halt. Broncs slid to bunch-footed halts, men hitting the ground, drawing their guns. Three hundred feet over the bank now was a long thick 'dobe wall about six feet high. It hid the view of the town beyond.

Guns in their fists, the men paused, looked from Sheriff Danner to Buck Malone. Men whose faces were hard-lined, whose bodies bore leaden slug scars of many Big Bend wars. Gunfighters all.

Ahead, a strange, sinister silence seemed to grip the town. Then just on the opposite side of the 'dobe wall Malone and the lawmen heard a stern, commanding voice crackle out one word:

"Ready!"

The one word flung Buck Malone into action. As if released from a spring he leaped over the cutbank, cursing, rifle gripped in his strong hands, like a charging fiend. Behind him raced the sheriff and his four men, crouching, eyes on the thick mud wall just ahead of them.

The deadly meaning of that word meant but one thing! The command to a firing squad!

"Mira!"— Aim!

Then Buck Malone hit the top of that 'dobe wall. The rifle was at his shoulder, pointing down at the other side.

"Hold it, Ramirez!"

Malone's knife-edged words ripped out even as the word "fire" was formed on the Mexican *jefe's* lips. And thunder-struck, Ramirez, standing beside a squad of his soldiers, jerked up his head.

LEVELED rifles at the shoulders of his uniformed soldiers, glinting in the morning sun, hung suspended in mid-air. The glittering black eyes that had been squinting through peep sights flicked up to Malone and the *gringo* lawmen who had suddenly appeared atop the wall. Appeared there as suddenly as jacks-in-the-box!

Five leveled six-guns and Malone's rifle were aimed at Ramirez' thick belly—*gringo* lawmen's guns! He gasped, eyes bugging, face pasty beneath his leathery skin. Wildly he looked from Vera Morgan and Cass who stood, hands tied behind them, their backs to the bullet-chipped execution wall.

"We're waitin', Ramirez!" Malone rasped. "Tell yore murderin' rats to drop their rifles or we're blowin' yuh to hell! They may git some of us—but we're gittin' *you* first!"

Like a cornered wolf Ramirez stood, baffled, fear overshadowing

the hate on his face. Rifles still in the air, the execution squad waited, tense.

Ramirez gulped, eyes shuttling desperately from the guns on the wall to his prisoners—Vera Morgan and Cass. They were looking up at Malone. But they couldn't talk. Vera Morgan whispered Buck's name, a short prayer of thanks.

Ramirez' tongue flicked out as he wet his dry lips. He sighed whistlingly, releasing the air in his lungs. He choked out an order to his men in Spanish. The rifles lowered to the ground.

"You ween, Buck Malone," he sighed smirkingly. "We wait too long to execute after you escape. Eet ees too bad." He bowed mockingly. "Next time perhaps eet weel be different, no? But now take your prisoners and go—"

Malone grinned a little. But the eyes that burned in his haggard face held a killer's gleam.

"They won't be a next time," he said tightly.

The taut-muscled bodies of the sheriff and his men seemed to relax a little. But their guns didn't waver.

"Here, Malone," said the sheriff quietly. He handed Buck a pocket knife. "Cut 'em loose."

Lowering his rifle, Malone dropped down off the wall and cut the leather thongs that had bound the hands of the prisoners.

"I'm obliged to yuh, Buck," said Cass, grinning. "Seems like yuh-all got here just in time. Thanks to yuh, Sheriff, for waitin' at the river."

"Buck!" whispered Vera Morgan.

Malone said something to her as he helped her over the wall. There was a lot of satisfaction in Sheriff Danner's eyes, but he still watched Ramirez and the sullen, staring execution squad. Malone and Cass leaped up to the wall.

"Cass," sang out Malone, "you and Vera run fer the hosses. Two of us will have to ride double. We're comin' *pronto.*"

But it wasn't until Cass had lifted the girl into the saddle of one of the broncs that Sheriff Danner signaled his men to drop back to the wall.

"*Adios,* Ramirez," Malone said dryly. "Watch yore long-range shootin'. We *might* come back!"

CHAPTER VII

Outlaw Bullets

ALL five lawmen and Buck Malone dropped to the ground, began edging back slowly to the broncs where Cass and his sister were waiting for them. Guns still covering the wall, all five lawmen and Malone hit leather.

The girl rode behind Sheriff Danner. Cass was riding double with one of the deputies. Then they dug in spurs and raced back down the arroyo in a clatter of hoofs.

"Head for the Tejanolito *Rancho,*" Buck Malone shouted. "Fan the breeze! They'll be on our tails before we hit the ridge if I'm readin' sign right. We can hold 'em off at the ranch!

But Buck Malone was wrong in this prediction. For back at the execution wall, Luis Ramirez was staring dumbly for the second time in just as many minutes into the black muzzle of a six-gun and listening to a voice that taunted him.

The voice of a dead man!

As Buck Malone and Sheriff Danner's posse spurred their broncs away from the river in the direction of San Carlos, the deputy called Red carried Franz Hartmann's unconscious form up to the brushy Mexican shore.

From the river he got water and washed the German's head wound. For the first time then he noticed the wound in the side of Hartmann's stomach, the blood soaked clothes about the banker's middle.

As the water rolled over the German's round, pain-distorted face, his eyes fluttered open, showing the whites, glowing insanely. Meaning-

less words babbling from his parched lips, he fought the air, clawing.

"Ramirez—he got me!" he gasped hoarsely. "Ramirez—he killed me!" His voice rose to a hysterical shriek.

The deputy struggled with Hartmann to quiet him. But Hartmann's arms flashed through the air like flails.

"*You* are trying to kill me!" he sobbed wildly.

The deputy cursed. Hartmann was fighting like a maniac, a man with superhuman strength. Grappling, panting for breath, both men blood-smeared now, rolled over and over. Then Hartmann screamed triumphantly as his hand clutched the butt of the deputy's gun.

Cursing, the law-dog's fist smashed down. Too late! The gun roared, bucked in the German's trembling fist. Surprise in his eyes, the lawman's body shuddered as he pitched forward on stiff legs and dropped to the sand.

Smoking gun still in hand, Hartmann looked down at the body a moment, eyes glowing wildly. Then he laughed cacklingly, hideously. He turned and ran to the lawman's horse nearby.

Groaning, sobbing with pain, he pulled himself up into the saddle, jerked up the reins. As the horse surged forward his clenched fist rose jerkily skyward.

"I ain't dead, Ramirez!" he raged. "*Nein!* Not yet do I die! I'm coming to kill you!"

Grey streaks of dawn interspersed with daubs of fiery red streaked the eastern sky as Franz Hartmann lashed his bronc through the desert country, straight south for San Carlos. Only a madman whose twisted mind was set upon one grim accomplishment could have made that ride.

Franz Hartmann, who should have been dead, was still alive. Hate was nursing that tiny spark of life within him, keeping him alive. Hate!

As he crested the rise that brought to view the squalid settlement below him in the sun-bathed valley, he saw Malone and the sheriff's posse tearing like mad down through an arroyo that came up behind the jail. He saw them in a dancing blur.

But Hartmann didn't follow them. Instead, he shot his bronc through the mesquite straight down the trail that led into the main street of the town.

San Carlos looked sinisterly deserted. If anyone saw the fat-faced blood-soaked German clinging to the kak horn on the back of his lathered bronc sliding to a halt there in front of the 'dobe jail, no warning was given.

He fell exhaustedly from the kak. Then with a lot of effort he pulled himself to his feet, sobs shaking his pain-racked body.

His wild, red eyes scanned the empty street about him. Voices, vague and far off, reached his ears. They sounded far off though they came from behind the jail. Then, like a wounded, dying coyote, he slunk past the 'dobe building toward the execution wall where Cass and his sister were facing death before a firing squad.

PANTING, lips frothing, Hartmann fell. He clawed the dust, crying out soft curses in his native tongue, got up. Every time he fell there was a small crimson pool that the dust soaked up.

Then he fell and couldn't rise.

But like a dog with both hind legs broken, he pulled himself along in the dust. In one hand he gripped the gun he had taken from the deputy back at the river.

A ghastly, gruesome sight he made, inching himself along beside the wall of that 'dobe building. He was almost blind. Everything was whirling in a red haze. His arms and legs were like leaden appendages barely able to move.

Finally he dragged himself to the corner of the building. There, ten feet from him, he saw the blurry forms of soldiers, Ramirez standing beside them.

Hartmann's near-sighted, bloodshot eyes squinted. He tried to steady his vision. He gritted back

groans that would betray his presence.

Perched up on the 'dobe wall were six men. Buck Malone, Sheriff Danner and his posse! They were just sliding down on the opposite side—out of view. And Malone's voice, barely audible, reached Hartmann's deadened ears.

"Adios, Ramirez—"

There were other words but Hartmann's jumbled senses could make no meaning from them. Then the sheriff and his men were gone. Through fast-dimming eyes, Hartmann saw Luis Ramirez. Slowly, leadenly, Hartmann raised his numb hand that gripped the six-gun.

The hammer clicked back. The sight was lined on Ramirez' dirty white-shirted back. Then rattlingly Hartmann called to him.

"I've come to kill—you, Ramirez!"

Body jerking at the sound of that uncanny voice, Ramirez spun about. His startled eyes found Hartmann lying on the ground there at the corner of the 'dobe jail, gun jutting from his fist. Hartmann, whose dry, cracked lips were drawn back with pain, teeth showing in a snarl. Eyes, fiery red, terrible to behold.

"Madre de Dios!" Ramirez husked, eyes flying wide with horror. "Hartmann—"

HARTMANN laughed. It sounded inhuman. The soldiers beside Ramirez stood as if in a trance. Then Ramirez shrieked to them. The soldiers moved.

Hartmann screamed, "Don't move, *soldados!* I'll kill the first to raise his gun!"

And the rifles raised no farther. Indecision on their swart faces, the soldiers stared into the muzzle of Hartmann's gun as it swayed up and down the line in an arclike motion. They saw death for the first one who made a move.

There was something hypnotic about the insane glow of those fiery red eyes of the *gringo* dog who was dying there in the dust. He was dying—dying—but he grinned—the grin of a corpse.

"Face about, *soldados,"* Hartmann gasped weakly.

And as if under a spell, the soldiers turned.

"Back now, Ramirez," Hartmann panted. "Back—to the wall—"

It was then Luis Ramirez knew he must die. He caught the significance of Hartmann's command. He saw the insane light in the German's eyes. He knew that not a man among those soldiers of his but who hated him and would welcome this opportunity to kill him. It was either die at the hands of his own men or let a *gringo* dog shoot him down.

He made his choice then and there without hesitation.

Hate burning in his eyes, contempt for the blubbering German who held the six-gun trained on him, he paced slowly backward until he touched the sun-baked mud wall. The very wall where he had seen many men die.

He looked unflinchingly from the German's terrible face to his own men. A sneer curled his lips.

Ramirez showed no fear now. He accepted this fate with all the stoicism and calm of his nature. He merely shrugged, flung up his right hand in a final gesture.

"Bueno! Let no one say Luis Ramirez was afraid to die. And let no one ever say that he died from the bullet of a *gringo* dog. I am ready. *Fuego!"*

On wide spread feet, a sneer on his lips, Luis Ramirez faced the leveled rifles of his soldiers. No groan, no sound escaped his lips as the blasting guns crashed the stillness of the morning and his body pitched forward to the ground, his chest shattered with leaden slugs.

Funny how fate tricks people. If Ramirez had only looked down at Hartmann as the rifles leveled at him, he would have seen that the German was—dead! He would have had time to call a halt to his own execution—and he would have lived.

High up on the rim that overlooked the town of San Carlos Buck Malone called a halt to the

lawmen. Eyes squinting through the morning sunlight they all looked back at the 'dobe buildings.

Strange there wasn't a band of Ramirez' renegades tearing across the desert after them. Instead, San Carlos showed no signs of activity. Like tiny, dwarfed figures they could barely discern the soldiers still standing near the execution wall. Apparently they hadn't moved.

Still standing by them was Luis Ramirez. They could recognize him by his white shirt.

Sheriff Danner, Vera Morgan behind him, Buck Malone, Cass and the posse stared at this scene which they couldn't *sabe*. Then Malone looked down at the saddle bag on the Mexican soldier's horse he was riding.

He fumbled under the flap and found a pair of powerful field glasses. The others watched him as he looked through them without speaking.

Down below, Ramirez seemed to be moving to the wall. Rifle barrels glittered brightly in the sunlight. They leveled. Then, from the muzzle ends, spurted flames. White wisps of smoke rose into the sky.

The valley echoed to the booming fire of the execution squad.

Buck Malone, Vera Morgan, Cass and the posse saw the white-shirted figure of Luis Ramirez crumple to the ground and lie still. But Buck Malone saw more.

Through the powerful field glasses he saw the sprawled figure of Franz Hartmann, body outflung beside one of the 'dobe shacks, six-gun clutched in his outstretched hand—dead.

"What happened, Malone?" Sheriff Danner asked.

Buck Malone lowered the field glasses.

"We won't be trailed now, Sheriff," he said quietly. "They just killed Ramirez. His own men shot him. That'll save us ever havin' to settle with him, Cass." He shook his head, puzzled. "I can't savvy it, though. Hartmann is down there—dead. And we left Hartmann back at the river with a deputy. Let's high-tail it to the river."

THEY rode back to the Rio where the sheriff had left a deputy in charge of Hartmann. They found the deputy lying in the sand nursing a shoulder wound. He was so weak from the loss of blood he couldn't move but he told them the story of how Hartmann had gone *loco*, seized his gun and shot him.

That cleared up a lot for Sheriff Danner. He sighed with relief, looked from the girl to Malone and Cass. He grinned a little but he spoke gruffly.

"Well, that's that, boys," he said. Buck Malone had slid down off his horse. He went to meet Vera Morgan who had also dismounted. Neither of them were paying much attention to what the sheriff was saying.

"I'm just wonderin', Cass," continued the lawman, "if we kinda overlooked yuh stickin' up the bank, considerin' why yuh two done it, if yuh and this Buck Malone gent will settle down and quit raisin' hell along this blamed river. If yuh'll promise me to cut it out I'll overlook a lot. Then tomorrow we'll all come back over here and haze yore Tejanolito herd back north of the river where it'll be safer to set up ranchin'."

Cass Morgan, still weak from his shoulder wound, nodded grimly. "I promise we'll quit raisin' hell, Sheriff," he said.

Buck Malone, face haggard, still battle-scarred from his fight with Ramirez' men, looked from Vera Morgan to the sheriff.

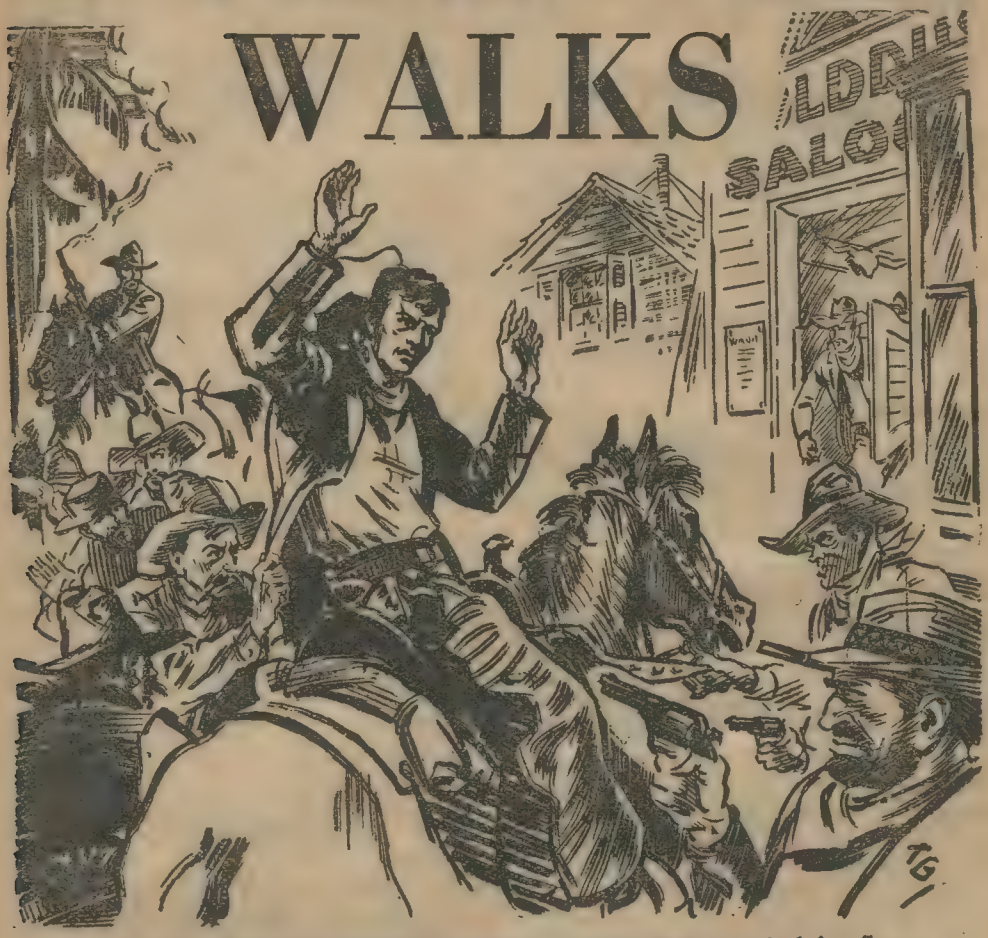
"I promise, Sheriff," he grinned.

And Vera Morgan, who had her arm about Malone's waist, looked up at the lawman, smiling happily.

"And I'll see," she said softly, "that they live up to it."

Next Month's Novel: THE TRAIL HERD, by A. Leslie

A DEAD MAN WALKS



The cry rose: "Hang the murderin' coyote!" Rough hands reached for Saxon

Tom Saxon Lays a Trap for the Killer Who Doomed Him to Lonely Nights Within the Shadow of the Gallows

By GUNNISON STEELE

Author of "Murder Range," "Killer's Cash," etc.

BLOOD! Tom Saxon's grey eyes hardened, and a premonition of evil clamped like a cold steel band about his heart as he stood there in the disordered room of old "Pyrites" Perkins' mountain hut.

Everything pointed to a terrible struggle. A bunk had been demolished. The stove had been overturned, dislodging the pipes, covering the floor with soot. The room, in general, had been wrecked. On the floor was a smear of dried blood; and, drop by crimson drop, a bloody trail writhed across the boards and through a back doorway.

That feeling of evil in Tom Saxon's heart deepened to certainty. His

gaze followed the crimson drops across the floor. Old Pyrites was badly wounded—or dead! The young wild horse hunter stepped across to the back doorway.

It had rained two nights previously. And there, etched plainly in the moist earth, were the imprints of a man's boots. A hundred yards behind the shack was a narrow but swift-flowing stream that wound across the little mountain valley. The boot-prints led toward this stream.

Eyes now keenly alert for danger, Tom Saxon stepped to the ground and followed the boot-marks. That trail, he guessed, would lead him to the body of Pyrites Perkins; for, at irregular intervals, drops of dried blood stained the ground beside the imprints.

The crimson-splotched trail told Saxon's experienced eyes a plain story. The footprints were much too large to have been made by old Pyrites' boots. And they were sunk deep into the soft earth, evidence that the man was carrying more than his own weight. The blood-clots explained the nature of his burden.

The bloodstains ended abruptly at the water-edge. Here the man's boots had sank deeply into the ooze. Then the boot-marks followed the creek bank down stream for several yards, before following a different course back to the hut.

The ugly truth was plain: Pyrites Perkins had been murdered, his body lugged to the stream and tossed into the icy waters!

Tom Saxon's hard eyes probed along the stream. Anger surged through his heart. The old prospector had been his friend, and had on one occasion saved his life.

Having suddenly found themselves out of a riding job several months ago, Tom Saxon—along with his saddlemate, "Slim" Orde—decided to take a whirl at rounding up wild mustangs, which were plentiful here in the Buckhorn Hills, and taming them for the market. They had made money. They had been lucky in finding a small cliff-bound valley, with only narrow openings at each end, which, by stretching wire gates across each opening, they had converted into an ideal spot for trapping and keeping the horses.

Only a few miles separated their trap from old Pyrites Perkins' shack. Pyrites was a friendly, scrawny, grey-whiskered old prospector who, for more years than most men remembered, had tramped the deserts and mountains in search of gold. Of late years, rumor had it, old Pyrites had grabbed a small fortune in dust and nuggets from the hills.

True or not, he had not changed his mode of living. His decrepit, shabby figure was a familiar one in the Buckhorn country. Regularly once a month for the last ten years, accompanied always by his ancient pack burro, Pyrites had trudged the ten miles into the mining and cow town of Buckhorn for supplies. Buckhorn had come to watch for Pyrites' coming, and grin and say:

"Well, here comes another month!"

Between the young mustang hunters and Pyrites had been cemented a deep, understanding friendship. They often visited each other, and talked in the red glow of their fires.

SAXON stared along the roiling stream, although he knew it was hopeless. Even a man strong and unwounded would find that current hard to buck. Old Pyrites was gone.

Some skunk, believing the rumors that Pyrites had a hoard of gold hidden somewhere about his shack, had sneaked up on the ancient prospector. Pyrites had obviously put up a terrific but futile battle, before being knifed or clubbed insensible.

Grief mingling with the rage in his heart, Saxon followed the stream to the notch in the walls where it escaped from the valley. But he found no sign of the old gold-hunter's body.

Finally he returned to the hut. Again his eyes were studying the disordered room. In his efforts to find Pyrites' gold hoard, the killer had overturned or ripped apart every object in the room. Pyrites' blood-stained hat lay on the floor, and other

pieces of clothing were scattered about.

Even some of the planks in the floor had been pried loose by the robber in his search. Saxon wondered if he had found the gold—if there had been any to find.

Curiously, he dropped to his knees, peered beneath the loose boards. He saw only empty space.

A sudden noise behind him jerked him erect. He whirled, hand darting toward his gun. And stopped.

A man stood in the doorway, a leveled six-gun in his hand—a gaunt, hawk-faced *hombre* with dull eyes and a thin, steel-trap mouth. Saxon knew him: Bart Strom, a slick-fingered gambler and alleged mining expert whose hangout was the Buckhorn saloons. Tom Saxon had never liked him.

A cold grin twitched Strom's thin lips as he stared at Saxon.

"Lost somethin' under them planks, *hombre?*" he asked.

Saxon's lean body relaxed. "Can't say that I have."

"Yuh won't find nothin' but a noose!" Now Strom's features were tight, cruel. "Looks like I caught yuh in the act, or right after it. Put up yore hands!"

Tom Saxon's eyes narrowed.

"Don't guess I get yuh, Strom!"

"You will, *pronto*, if yuh don't do as I say! I'm takin' yuh in to the Buckhorn jail—fer murderin' old Pyrites."

"How do yuh know Pyrites' been killed, if yuh just got here?" Saxon demanded.

Bart Strom flushed, and snarled angrily: "I c'n read signs, can't I? This room's been tore all to hell, and there's blood on the floor. Where is he, if yuh ain't done away with him?"

"I'm pretty sure old Pyrites's been killed," said Saxon, quietly. "But I didn't do it. I happened along a few minutes ago, and saw what yuh see. Somebody killed 'im, and throwed his body into the creek out there. An' I aim to find out who done it!"

"I ain't sap enough to swallow that yarn," the gambler sneered. "Put up yore hands, yuh murderin' rat, or I'll let yuh have it center!"

Again Tom Saxon's body stiffened. He looked into Bart Strom's dull eyes—and saw death, swift and ruthless. Not yet grasping the deadly seriousness behind Strom's accusation, he slowly raised his hands.

Strom glided forward, snaked Saxon's gun from its holster. He glanced quickly at the weapon.

"One shell been fired, right recent," he barked triumphantly. "How do yuh explain that, *hombre?*"

"I shot a coyote, half an hour ago," said the mustang hunter angrily, "and forgot to reload. "See here, Strom, if yuh're serious—"

"Yuh'll find out how serious I am, when yuh feel hemp scrapin' yore gizzard! What'd yuh do with ol Pyrites' body?"

"Yuh're so smart, you tell me where it is!"

"Yuh'll change yore tune, *pronto!*" Strom's snake-eyes probed about the room. "Did yuh find pore Pyrites' gold cache?"

"Strom, I guess yuh're honest, but yuh're makin' a mistake. I didn't kill Pyrites, nor know nothin' about it. Like I said, I jest dropped by to visit a few minutes—"

"Mebbe," the gaunt man sneered, "yuh'll get a chance to tell all that to a jury, if the boys don't string yuh up sudden-like when they hear about it. Folks liked ol' Pyrites mighty well."

REALIZING that nothing he said would convince Strom of his innocence, Saxon lapsed into silence. Appearances, he realized, were against him. Nevertheless, the gambler's sneering, belligerent attitude had fanned the fires of anger in his heart. The tall, red-haired cowboy's lips set grimly.

He watched Strom narrowly; for gradually he had begun to realize the deadly seriousness of what might happen if Strom carried him to Buckhorn and announced that he had murdered old Pyrites.

But Bart Strom's vigilance did not relax. Prodding Saxon before him,

he followed the crimson trail to the creek bank. There, reading the signs of Pyrites' fate, he flew into a rage.

"Pyrites was my friend," he said harshly, "and I aim to see that the skunk what killed 'im swings. It's mighty lucky I was ridin' out here on a friendly little visit today, I guess."

Tom Saxon said nothing. It was true that the gambler had appeared to like old Pyrites, had on numerous occasions visited the prospector's hut. That Pyrites had seen suspicious of his motives did not change the fact.

As they returned to the hut, Saxon noticed Pyrites' grey old burro in a pole corral nearby, long ears drooping as if in sorrow.

Saxon's powerful roan gelding still stood with dragging reins before the shack. Bart Strom had concealed his mount in a nearby thicket before creeping up to the hut. Saxon wondered about this as he stared warily at the gambler.

"Get on yore bronc," Storm ordered. "We're headin' fer town."

FOR an instant, as he mounted his horse, Strom's back was turned to the mustang hunter. And suddenly, as he stared at Strom's back, Saxon's lean body stiffened. His lips tightened grimly. Then Strom faced him again, and said sneeringly:

"Yuh're takin' yore last ride, *hombre!*"

Tom Saxon's mind was busy on the ten-mile ride to Buckhorn.

The trail dipped suddenly through a notch that slit the valley rim—and there Buckhorn lay at the base of the decline.

Tom Saxon eyed the sunblasted buildings as they rode along the single dusty street, eyes hard and bitter. Bart Strom stopped before a rambling frame building labeled "Golddust Saloon," drew his gun and fired into the air.

Quickly a crowd gathered about them — mostly bearded, hard-eyed *hombres,* men who hung around the Buckhorn saloons and lived by their wits, with a sprinkling of honest miners and ranchers. Curiously they eyed Tom Saxon, who sat grim-faced and with bound wrists in his saddle.

When a sizeable crowd had gathered, Strom lifted a slim, white hand impressively.

"Gents," he cried, "pore ol' Pyrites Perkins has been murdered, his body throwed into a crick. And here's the polecat what done it!"

A dead silence greeted this flat statement. Then a low murmur ran through the crowd — amazement, at first, shocked unbelief. Then, like a muddy torrent gaining headway, the sound increased, became grim, menacing.

Tom Saxon's gaze met only staring, unfriendly eyes. He felt a prickling sensation along his spine.

"Men," he spoke up, earnestly, "there's been a bad mistake made. Yuh all know me—you know that I wouldn't pull a dirty trick like that. Why, ol' Pyrites was my friend—"

"He was our friend, too," yelled a squat, bearded miner, "and if he's been killed, we'll swing the *hombre* as done it!"

"He's been done for, like I said," Bart Strom cried quickly. "And there ain't no doubt Tom Saxon done it. He'd done throwed the body into the stream, but I caught 'im tearin' Pyrites' shack to pieces, lookin' fer his gold."

"Men," Saxon cried, "he's lyin' about that. I *was* there in Pyrites' shack, but I'd just ridden in to chin with him for a while. I found signs that Pyrites 'd been killed, his body lugged to the creek close to his hut and throwed in. But I ain't got no idea who done it, unless—"

"That's too thin, *hombre,*" Bart Strom interrupted harshly. He turned to the grim-faced men, his voice rising with emotion: "Gents, this snake here's plain guilty. Pyrites was our friend—and I say he's got to be avenged!"

Again that low mutter, like distant thunder, filtered through the crowd—as filled with menace as a coiled rattler. Strom's fiery words were arousing them to a lynch-mad pitch.

"Hang the murderin' coyote!"

Other voices took up the cry. Rough, vengeful hands reached for him, pulled him from the saddle. A man went for a rope.

But suddenly a wiry, grey-bearded, quiet-eyed little man shouldered his way through the milling crowd. On his vest was a star, in his hand a six-gun.

Sheriff Turk Horn spoke quietly, but his words carried weight.

"Men, yuh can jest tell me what this is all about. I'll take charge here—and there ain't gonna be no lynchin'!"

The crowd fell back, uncertain. They knew the little sheriff's words were backed by a cold nerve and a pair of speedy six-guns.

"This *hombre's* murdered ol' Pyrites Perkins!" Bart Strom snarled, baffled fury in his dull eyes. Tersely he related how he had discovered Tom Saxon in Pyrites' wrecked shack, even adding a few lurid touches of his own.

"Looks bad," the sheriff agreed. "I'll jest jail this gent, and ride out to Pyrites' place."

TEN minutes later Tom Saxon found himself alone in a dirty cell in Buckhorn's rickety jail.

His thoughts were hard, bitter. Slim Orde, he guessed, would soon miss him, would be riding in to see him.

Slim, loyal to the core, *did* ride in to see him. That night, sometime after midnight, he sneaked up to a back window and with a crowbar pried the bars loose from their rotten moorings.

He stuck his homely, freckled face through the opening. "Come a-jumpin' outa this flea-ranch, pard," he grinned. "I got a coupla broncs waitin'!"

Tom Saxon's hesitation was short. He didn't like the idea of running away without trying to prove his innocence. But he realized that the evidence against him was too strong.

Hastily he wriggled through the opening. Slim Orde had a couple of saddled horses waiting in an alley. They mounted and slipped quietly out of Buckhorn, headed west.

"A Slash L waddy rode by at sundown and told me they had yuh in jail," Slim said as they rode. "What's it all about?"

Tom told him.

"The skunk what killed Pyrites is most likely some of the riff-raff that hangs around the Buckhorn saloons," he declared. "But I don't know any way of provin' it. It'll look mighty like I'm guilty — bustin' jail thisaway."

"Hell!" Slim exclaimed. "Yuh wasn't gonna let them *hombres* stretch yore neck, was yuh? I heard 'em talkin' in the saloons."

"They likely won't miss me 'fore mornin'. Suppose we ride over to Pyrites' hut and look things over again?"

But they found no more than Saxon had seen that afternoon—Pyrites' floppy old hat, a pair of old blue denim overalls, and other belongings of Pyrites which were scattered about. The old prospector's body, swirled downstream by the swift current, would probably never be found.

The two partners rode thoughtfully across the hills to their wild horse cache. Somber-eyed, Tom Saxon eyed the rocky ramparts surrounding their log cabin under the walls.

"I guess it's the outlaw trail for me," he said, and his gorge rose at the thought. "If I went back to Buckhorn, I wouldn't have a chance for a fair trial, and I don't aim to stretch hemp for a crime I ain't guilty of."

"They won't never find yuh," Slim declared, "till yuh get ready to come out. Yuh remember that cave we blundered onto that day two months ago, 'way up close to Lost Squaw Peak? We'll carry yuh some grub and blankets up there, right now, and you c'n den-up till I find out who killed ol' Pyrites."

Saxon brightened. "*Bueno*—only I go up to the cave alone. Come daylight, Turk Horn'll be foggin' up here with a posse. Yuh'll have to be here to tell him some lies."

Tom Saxon secured a fresh six-gun and cartridges; he made a small pack of blankets and food. A while before dawn he mounted and rode away toward the purple, pine-clad hills above.

He had been gone no more than an hour when grim-eyed old Turk Horn pounded with a posse at his heels up from the lowlands. Slim Orde saw them coming. He grinned, cocked his *sombrero* over one eye and wondered how to look indignant.

DURING the next week Tom Saxon learned what it meant to be an outlaw, to brood in bitter solitude in the glow of hidden campfires. He knew that posses would be scouring the hills for him, bent on taking him out to a hangman's noose; but he had little fear of discovery.

His hideout was a deep cavern which, its entrance well concealed by a jackpine thicket in a rock-walled canyon, extended far back into the mountain. Grim peaks reared all about, covered with jackpine and cedar, slashed by canyons, storm-buffeted. This was the wildest portion of the Buckhorn Range.

Grass was plentiful for his horse; and flowing along the canyon bed was an icy little stream.

Saxon never roamed far from the cave. At night he sat in the red glow of his campfire and thought of the quirk of fate that had made an outlaw of him. An outcast, doomed to countless lonely nights in the waste places, living forever in the shadow of the gallows—and for a crime he hadn't committed!

Who had killed old Pyrites Perkins? Any number of men in and around Buckhorn might have been capable of the cowardly deed. Gamblers, loafers, men with no visible means of support. And there was Bart Strom.

Almost a week passed before Slim Orde rode back up to the hideout.

"Them posses have been too thick," he explained. "They think stronger than ever that yuh done it, Tom, and I ain't been able to uncover a thing to prove otherwise. The *hombre* what done it must been mighty slick."

"Mebbe I shoulda stayed and stood trial."

"Naw, yuh wouldn't 'a' had a chance. Them *hombres* down there swear they'll swing the skunk what killed Pyrites, if it takes ten years. Bart Strom swears you done it, and he keeps the others riled up alla time. Somethin' fishy about that *hombre*."

"Slim," Tom Saxon said slowly, "I been thinkin' considerable since I been up here. There's got to be some way of findin' out who killed old Pyrites."

"Yeah, but how? I've thought till my brains creak even in my sleep. Somebody killed Pyrites, but who?"

"I think mebbe I've got a way o' findin' out. Nobody but old Pyrites ever knew who the killer was—so mebbe we'll make Pyrites help us chase him into the open."

Slim Orde glanced sharply at his partner. "But Pyrites has been dead more'n a week."

"Yeah, but sometimes dead men walk—and talk. Listen—"

Tersely Tom Saxon outlined his plan, and the chill night wind snaking through the black hills laughed with grisly mirth.

"By cracky!" Slim exclaimed when he had finished. "It sounds sorta crazy, but mebbe it'll work!"

"It's got to," said Tom grimly, "or I'll be dancin' on air before another sunset!"

His sudden appearance in Buckhorn, the next evening, threw the town into turmoil. A posse, headed by Bart Strom, hot, tired and thirsty, had just ridden in from the hills and were gathered in the Golddust Saloon.

A miner, glancing through a window, saw the horse and rider coming slowly along the street. Saxon, looking neither to right nor left, was headed directly toward the Golddust Saloon. He appeared calm and unworried. Obviously he wore no gun.

The miner yelled suddenly: "My gosh, thar the murderin' varmint is now!"

After the first shocked silence, a

cry went up. A score of men went into the street from the Golddust, hands on gun butts, eyes hard with vengeance-lust. The cry spread among the warped, sun-blasted shacks; men popped from doorways, plowed through the hot dust toward the fast-gathering crowd.

The killer of old Pyrites Perkins was in town!

Tom Saxon stopped his mount, sat regarding the hard-eyed men coolly. Now the crowd was silent, a silence weighted with a sinister menace. Apparently, in their wrath, they had seen nothing strange in Saxon's appearance among the very men who had sworn to hang him.

"Men," he spoke quietly, "I've come back to clear myself."

Bart Strom, a furious light in his eyes, pushed his way to the front. "Yuh've come back to a noose!" he cried harshly. "Grab 'im, men! Somebody get a rope!"

The tension cracked. A dozen men pushed forward. Rough hands seized Tom Saxon and pulled him from the saddle. An ugly sound, the rising roar of a vengeance-mad mob, rose on the hot air.

Saxon struggled furiously to retain his feet. "Wait, men!" he cried. "Do you think I'd be fool enough to ride into town if I didn't have somethin' to say?"

"It's too late to talk, *hombre*," Strom snarled. "Pyrites Perkins was the best friend I had, and I aim to see yuh swing fer murderin' him. Ol' Turk Horn ain't here today to stop us!"

IT was true—the old sheriff was out in the hills with another posse.

"Men," he said earnestly, "I know yuh all'd want to be fair and square. Let me talk jest one minute—then go ahead and hang me!"

A burly, honest-faced man dressed in rancher's garb, loomed at the prisoner's side.

"He's right, *hombres*," he boomed. "This gent's got a right to speak his piece 'fore he dies."

"Won't take long," declared the red-haired mustang hunter. "I jest want to say—if yuh hang me, yuh'll hang an innocent man. 'Cause old Pyrites Perkins ain't dead!"

An amazed murmur sifted through the crowd at the startling announcement.

"He's lyin'!" Strom spat. "Jest playin' fer time—"

"Shut up!" the big rancher ordered curtly.

"Old Pyrites is still alive and kickin'," Saxon continued slowly, letting every word sink in. "Some polecat tried to kill him, all right. Thinkin' him dead, they lugged him to the creek behind his hut and tossed his body in. But he wasn't quite dead—the icy water revived him enough that, after floatin' a considerable distance, he was able to swim out. Since then he's been up in the hills, gettin' well, so he could come back and tell folks who it was that tried to murder him."

Tom Saxon paused. His gaze wandered deliberately over the tense faces about him.

"Folks, the snake what tried to murder Pyrites is right here in this crowd! And we'll soon know his name. For Pyrites is comin' to town today to point 'im out. In fact, he's jest about due now!"

The closely grouped men shifted restlessly. Eyes were strained, questioning, as they stared into the tense faces of the men nearest them.

A shrill voice cried suddenly: "God—he's tellin' the truth! Thar's ol' Pyrites now!"

All eyes turned upward toward the notch in the walls above Buckhorn where the trail slid through. Two figures were coming through the notch. Out in front was an ancient burro, grey, shaggy, mincing along with lazily flopping ears. And behind was—Pyrites Perkins!

A hundred times Buckhorn had seen the old gold-hunter come through that notch. He came now as always—shuffling slowly, wiry figure bent, his progress aided by a crooked staff which he carried in his gnarled hand. His denim overalls were baggy, his floppy old hat partially hiding his whiskery features.

A cry went up as somebody remembered it was the first day of a new month. Then the cry died to strained silence again.

Whom would old Pyrites point to accusingly?

Suddenly Tom Saxon said sharply: "Don't nobody leave!"

For Bart Strom had been edging stealthily toward the edge of the crowd. The gaunt gambler's face was ghastly white, his teeth bared in a snarl. A murderous light glared from his dull eyes.

Now, with a furious curse, he turned suddenly and started fighting his way through the crowd.

"Stop that *hombre!*" the burly rancher bellowed, and dived after the escaping gambler. His huge fist lashed out, smashed Strom to the dusty street.

A dozen eager hands reached for the cursing, struggling gambler, held him helplessly.

"Strom done it!" a voice cried. "Claimin' to be his best friend—then tried to murder 'im fer his poke!"

Now the crowd turned back to the trail above. And as the bent, shabby figure and his old burro entered the street and approached slowly, amazement seeped again into staring eyes.

For that shuffling figure, after all, wasn't Pyrites Perkins!

With a grin Slim Orde removed the bushy false whiskers from his freckled face. He straightened his lanky figure. All that remained of Pyrites Perkins was the baggy denim trousers, checked shirt, and the floppy old hat. And the ancient burro.

"That ain't Pyrites!" Strom snarled fiercely. "Yuh tricked me, blast yuh!"

"Yuh tricked yoreself," said Tom Saxon, without pity, "when yuh turned killer."

He turned to the grim-faced men. "I'm sorry I had to fool yuh, but it was the only way I could prove I never killed ol' Pyrites. I took a long chance on the real killer bein' right here in Buckhorn, even though I'd suspected Bart Strom right from the start. I wondered, that day at Pyrites' shack, about him happenin' up jest at that time. And there was somethin' else. The killer had carried the body from the hut to the stream over his shoulder. That day, when Strom started to get on his bronc, I saw a splotch of fresh blood on his shirt. And the blood *was on the back of his shirt!* Bart Strom is guilty, all right."

AGAIN that ugly murmur ran through the crowd. But now their wrath was not directed against Tom Saxon.

"Where's that rope?" a cowboy yelled.

Cursing and struggling furiously in the craven fear that gripped him, Strom was dragged away.

Tom Saxon watched, grim-eyed. But a load had been lifted from his heart as he and Slim Orde prepared to ride back into the hills to their wild horse cache.

"Now we c'n go after that new bunch uh mustangs I located a few days ago," Slim grinned. "Danged if they ain't the prettiest critters I ever saw in the Buckhorns!"

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PROBAK JUNIOR

Gettin' Wuthless Cowyaps t' Act Peaceful is a Plumb Hard Job, Opines Johnny!

I brings up a sizzling right for Woodchuck's jaw, but somehow he ain't right where I aimed

Sheep War *on* Sour Crick

A HOOKER BROS. STORY

By GRANT TAYLOR

Author of "The Wild Man of Canyon Lobo," "Nature in the Raw," etc.

LET a feller git a repitation as a peaceful, law-abidin' citizen, runnin' miles to dodge a ruckus, and Old Man Trouble right away heads to kick yuh on the shins.

Take me, Johnny Hooker, head o' cow firm o' Hooker Bros. here in Canyon Lobo. There ain't a more peace-lovin' cowman in forty counties, spite o' me bein' afflicted with

my coot li'l brother Stevie an' two wu'thless cowhands, "One-Ton" Benson and Pablo. With them three exasperatin' knotheads tuh ride herd on, besides havin' to eat the kind o' chuck old George, our cook, slings out, I ought to have a disposishun all same as a grizzly bear with a big red ant in both ears.

But me, I'm so peaceful that only t'other evenin' while I'm joggin' home, I decides I'll jist hang my ol' hawgleg up on a nail and quit luggin' it around.

The only use I got for that peacemaker anyway is tuh bat them wuthless cowyaps over the haid, an' a neck yoke off'n the hay wagon'll do jist as well fer that.

Yessir, things is so calm and quiet, a gun ain't needed on this range no more'n a submarine.

Which thinkin', after I turn my hoss in the corral, I start for the shack, unbucklin' said gunbelt as I go. Soon's our cook, old George, sees me, he lets out a bawl.

"Keep that gun on, yuh golrammed idjit!" he bellers. "Hell's tuh pay, an' no credit."

OLD GEORGE is standin' in the door with a dishrag in one hand an' a butcher knife in the other, an' I think mebbe he's on a hoss linament drunk.

"No, George," I says, "I've swore off wearin' a gun. It's all foolishness. Act peaceful yoreself and ever'body'll treat yuh peaceful—that's what I found out. I'm layin' this gun away tuh gather dust and cobwebs."

"Yeah?" says old George. "I got news that'll make yuh buckle that gun back on and hunt round fer a mate tuh it. Git yore hamstrung outfit intuh action, Johnny. Muley Hanks rode by here 'bout noon an' said ol' Woodtick Williams was headed through yore Sour Crick Mesa range with a couple thousand sheep—put that down in yore tally book."

Gran Quivera! That old hellion of a Woodtick Williams headed our way ag'in with his dang stinkin' woollies, and jist as I declared peace on the world. Last time he tried tuh drive blats through our range, our outfit scattered wool an' Mex sheepherders and lead all over the flats.

Seems like these sheepmen never will learn, an' I start tuh reach fer my old .45, when I recollect I jist swore off on guns.

An' there ain't no old sheepman goin' tuh scare me out o' that. Nossir, there's a new deal around Canyon Lobo. Tact an' diplomacy is to be the rule 'stead o' powder an' lead. The dove of peace had done found himself a home on Hooker Bros. cow ranch.

I'll simply ride up peaceful but firm an' tell o' Woodtick Williams tuh parade his sheep over some other cattle ranch.

About that time, my partner and brother Stevie rides in with our hands, One-Ton and Pablo, and old George begins shoutin' the news at 'em about these sheep.

Right away them three gits blood in their eyes and charges in the house fer carbines and cartridges.

"Hol' on," I tells 'em. "Calm down. No guns is needed. We're goin' up and extend the hand o' peace tuh this Woodtick range louse."

"Shore," says One-Ton. "Extend the hand o' peace with one finger p'intin' outa the country, an' then use our .30-30s an' .45s to see they take it."

"Yuh said it, One-Ton," says Stevie. "We got no time tuh lose, chasin' that sheepherdin' skunk off Sour Crick, Johnny. I got some news. Stranger by the name o' Mullens is wantin' to buy that range off'n us. Chancet to turn loose of a chunk o' grass we been wantin' to be rid o'. Only things Mullens insists on, that they's no sheep near there and it's got to be a cool climate."

Sour Crick is sure got a cool enough climate, bein' up under the roof of the sky, and yuh c'd freeze ice cream fer a Fourth o' July celebration by settin' milk out in the sun.

"I'm to drop by for him at Bill

Benz's tonight an' take him up to that line camp to sleep, so's we c'n ride over the mesa fu'st thing in the mornin'. An' we don't want no sign o' sheep in the country, an' we got to pray it's a cold day. C'mon, buckle that gun on, an' you ride on an' chase them sheep out o' the country an' give the air a chancet to git clear of the smell. Git movin', an' don't save no powder."

Which sayin', Stevie he hightails it up the canyon for Bill Benz's ranch, where he's tuh meet that ranch buyer, Mullens.

One-Ton and Pablo comes outa the house luggin' rifles, while old George is carryin' his scattergun. I holds up my hand.

"Look here," I says. "I said no guns, an' I mean it. Put them smoke-poles back in the house. Treat ever'-body peaceful an' they'll treat yuh the same."

"In a pig's eye they will," says One-Ton. "I'm takin' along my old sheepman eradicator; yuh kin go naked if yuh want tuh."

Can't argy them fellers outa it, and they ain't no time to lose, so we forks our ponies an' heads up the crick, headin' for Sour Crick Mesa. Hittin' our fence on top the mesa, we foller along it, figgerin' old Woodtick will try tuh sneak through there. Up by the gate we camp a while, and shore 'nough a sheep wagon drives up and old Woodtick Williams hops out.

HE'S a li'l old wiry feller with red sideburn whiskers an' a nose like a Boston bulldog. Greasy as a Piute squaw, an' he ain't had a haircut since the price o' sheep went down.

I slides off my horse an' steps over tuh the gate.

"Yuh ain't drivin' no mangy woollies through this here range," I states, nice an' perlite, as befits a law-abidin' citizen like me.

"Hell I ain't," he yelps. "Who says I ain't?"

"Me, Johnny Hooker, boss o' the Hooker spread," I says, still calm an' soothin'.

"Git out'n the way, yuh homely, long-nosed buzzard," he screeches, "'fore I spits in yore eye an' drown yuh."

Woodtick's side-whiskers begin tuh curl up warlike at the ends.

I see I got tuh use plenty o' the well-knowed Hooker tact an' diplomacy if I stays out o' trouble. Out o' the corner o' my eye I kin see One-Ton an' Pablo an' old George fingerin' the butts o' their guns, but I'm thinkin' mebbe they don't see what I do, which is the end o' what looks like a .45-70 easin' out under the cover o' that wagon.

Course, nothin' like that would make me, "Big Boy" Johnny Hooker, feel no more peaceful an' law-abidin' than what I am, but jist the same I figger this is a good time tuh show them cowpokes what kind o' leader they got.

"Lissen here, Mister Williams," I says, "me an' you kin settle this here thing without no gunsmoke an'—"

"Shore we kin," he busts in, dancin' around all same as a bronc with a rope under his tail. "Jist pull off yore jacket so's I kin take yuh apart tuh see what holds yuh together. If yuh kin lick me, I'll head my sheep back t'other way; an' if I wallop yuh, the gate comes down an' stays down."

"Haw! Haw!" bellers One-Ton, near fallin' off his hoss. "Imajine that li'l dried-up sheep-lovin' runt tryin' to claw yuh up. Take him on, Johnny. It's a peaceful way o' settlin' this."

It don't seem right fer a big feller like me tuh jump a li'l wart like Woodtick, but mebbe I oughta overlook that tuh pervent gunplay. This won't be no fight a-tall. I'll jist cuff his ears down a li'l without hurtin' him no more'n I have tuh.

"I'll call that bet, Mister Williams," I says. "If I don't give yuh the worst spankin' yuh had since yore maw turned yuh loose, I'll take yuh tuh our line shack t'night, an' yuh kin bed yore danged sheep up back o' there."

"YEE-e-yip!" squeals that li'l wart, an' whams me right in the eye with a used cud o' chawin' terbacker.

"Wow!" I bellers, an' reaches tuh grab that dang li'l runt an' turn him over my knee. They ain't no lousy sheepman kin slam his chawin' terbacker in my eye an' injoy good health.

I make a rush fer him, an' he ducks under my arm, round t' my back, an' when I turn on him, he leaps off of the ground and whams me on the jaw with both paws. Which that dang lowdown sheep trick kind o' ketches me off balance an' I stagger back a few steps an' then set down kind o' hard. He don't wait fer me tuh git up, but starts tuh walk right up my frame, which is the kind o' fair fightin' tuh be expected from a lousy sheep-herder.

But he sure tackled a natural-born rough-and-tumble fighter in me. Thinkin' like a flash, I draw my knee back an' sock both my legs in his belly clear up tuh my ankles.

"Ye-e-off!" squawls Woodtick, an' goes sailin' off tuh land up ag'in the wire fence.

"Yip-ayee!" bellers One-Ton. "Stay with 'im, Johnny. Bite off his nose an' spit it in his face."

As I git to my feet, Woodtick comes chargin' in ag'in. I figgers they ain't no use tryin' to be gentle with him. Treat him rough and it'll be more merciful. So I reach back an' start a haymakin' wallop down from my boot heel.

Swi-s-h! I bring it up sizzlin' right fer Woodtick's chin, but somehow he ain't right where I aimed. All I do is rip a big, wide hole in the air, and next thing that dang runt has grabbed my arm an' ducked back behind me ag'in. He yanks my arm over his shoulder an' humps his back all same as a salty bronc. One o' the tricks you could figger a sheep-herder to pull, him figgerin' tuh h'ist me right over his shoulder an' stand me up on my off ear.

But he sure don't know me, else he wouldn't try nothin' like that. I hook both spurs in his flank an' grabs me a handful o' whiskers.

"Ride 'im, cowboy!" bawls that One-Ton. "Yee-ow, look at 'im sunfish."

Woodtick keeps hoppin' around tryin' tuh flip me over his shoulder, but he ain't havin' much luck. Finally he starts pinwheelin' an' both my spurs rip loose, takin' all Woodtick's overalls from his knees up. I go sailin' off like a dang comet with a handful o' whiskers an' most o' Woodtick's pants hangin' tuh my spurs.

It was plumb laughable, or would o' been, if I hadn't landed ag'in the wheel o' that dang sheep wagon, whammin' my head so hard I don't take no more interest in nothin'.

WHEN I brushes away the stars and comes to, One-Ton an' old George is fannin' me with their hats. I reach up an' feel o' my haid where a knot is risin' up like I'm gittin' ready tuh sprout a horn. I don't see Woodtick no place, but I kin hear him rummagin' around in the wagon, where I reckon he's lookin' fer another pair o' pants.

One-Ton an' Pablo an' old George is ra'rin' tuh plug Woodtick, but I don't stand fer nothin' like that. It ain't never goin' to be said that me, Johnny Hooker, don't stick tuh the rules. Old Woodtick got the best o' the scrap, but I ain't licked by no matter o' means.

It's jist another one o' them emergencies that me, Johnny Hooker, is allus bein' called on tuh meet. Stevie expects me tuh see they ain't no sheep around Sour Crick tuh spoil that sale, and they ain't a-goin' tuh be.

"Yuh've gone an' got yoreself in a helluva mess now," says One-Ton. "Gittin' yoreself whupped by a mangy sheep-herder an' agreein' tuh let them sheep bed on yore range. Mebbe yuh forgot about that ranch buyer Stevie is bringin' over, what wants a sheep-free range an' a cool climate."

"Well, he'll shore see a cool climate," says old George, shiverin' as a cold wind blows down off the Truchas peaks.

"An' he won't see no sheep neither," I says. "We'll bed them sheep down back o' the line camp, an' I got a scheme what'll send them

blats outa the country all same as Santa Anna and his greasers pullin' their freights outa Texas."

Purty soon Woodtick jumps down out o' the wagon with a new pair o' overalls on. He's limpin' a li'l on his right hind foot an' his whiskers don't match up no more.

"How 'bout it, Hooker?" he says. "Do I git tuh drive through or don't I?"

"Did yuh ever know a Hooker tuh go back on his word?" I states. "I'll have Pablo show yore herders where tuh bed them sheep, an' yuh come along tuh our line shack fer a sociable evenin'."

WITH which I steps over an' lets the gate down. About then that band o' sheep comes rollin' up an' begins tuh slip under the fence an' through the gate. Jist fer a few seconds it looks like One-Ton an' Pablo an' old George is goin' tuh break down an' cry.

"I ain't never thought I'd see the time," wails One-Ton, "when a boss o' mine 'ud git down an' kiss a bunch o' scabby sheep."

That's a cowhand fer yuh. Allus shottin' off their mouths, criticizin' or handin' out advice. If them cowyaps told me any more, they'd have to widen their mouths to do it, and if they widened their mouths any they'd have to shove their ears back.

Now yuh take me, Johnny Hooker. I don't say much, but right when folks think they got me beat, is when they better take another look at their hole card.

As them sheep rambles past, I size 'em up. Seems I never seen so many goats in one li'l band o' sheep before. Course, they is allus a few goats in a bunch o' sheep, tuh act as leaders, else them dumb woollies would jist walk around in circles till they strayed off tuh starve tuh death. Them goats got tuh pack the brains for the whole outfit o' sheep.

Old Woodtick's big collection o' goats seems tuh indicate his sheep is low on brain power. There's one ol' billy that's got whiskers a foot long, and horns even longer. It's while I'm noticin' all this I remembers something worth knowin' about goats, an' I takes One-Ton and Pablo and old George to one side.

"All we got to do," I says, "is stampede a few of them goats t'night and them sheep will foller. Stampede them goats bad enough, an' there won't be a sheep left on Sour Crick Mesa by tomorrer mornin' when that buyer Stevie's bringin' over rides out tuh look over the range."

"How yuh aim tuh stampede them sheep?" asks One-Ton.

"I'll draw you jugheads a picter of it," I says. "First, we got to get them Mex sheepherders good an' drunk. I got a keg o' moonshine I buried last fall near that line camp for a huntin' trip I aimed to take. Pablo kin take some o' that whiskey an' go circulate with them herders, as a feller Mex, an' git 'em drunk. Then old George and One-Ton, yuh'll perceed to ketch as many of them goats as possible."

"What fer?" asks old George.

"Up in that cabin," I goes on, "with the groceries we keep there in case o' gittin' ketched in a snowstorm, is a can o' red pepper. Yuh fellers take that red pepper an' powder it in the whiskers of a few o' them goats, an' they'll go crazy an' stampede outa there like a lightnin' streak. The sheep will natcherally foller wherever them goats lead.

"Meanwhile," I says, "I will also git old Woodtick drunk on that whiskey an' stick him in his wagon an' haul him outa the country after his sheep. That'll show him Hooker Bros. ain't to be fooled with."

"Huh!" complains One-Ton. "Puttin' red pepper in a goat's whiskers. What a job fer a cowhand! How about puttin' salt on their tails, too?"

"Keep yore humor hobbled," I says. "Yuh hired out fer a tough hand, didn't yuh?"

"Yeah," yowls One-Ton, "but I didn't hire out tuh wrastle no billy goats around in the moonlight."

Pablo he rides off tuh show them herders o' Woodtick's where tuh bed the sheep, while me an' One-Ton an' old George, with Woodtick in the

wagon, we heads fer our line shack. That shack is one we bought off a nester a few years back, tuh git rid of him; it ain't nothin' but a low-roofed one-room sort of a lean-to lay-out, built right up ag'in a low cliff.

Old George he starts a fire in the old stove to cook up a li'l chuck, while I dig up that whiskey keg. Fillin' a half gallon jug with part o' it, I brings it in an' pours Woodtick out a sizeable snort, amountin' to about as much as two fingers in a dishpan. After which I gargle a small decoction an' pass the jug around tuh One-Ton an' old George, which hogs act like they got cramps in their elbows soon as they h'ist that jug.

"Fine," gurgles Woodtick, wipin' his whiskers on his shirt sleeve. "Dang if I ain't beginnin' tuh think cow folks is a'most human."

"Same t' you," I says. "I got a li'l favor tuh ask, Woodtick. My li'l brother is bringin' a stranger over t'night to camp here. I wish yuh wouldn't mention sheep nor let on 'bout any sheep bein' up here."

Woodtick stares at me sorta queer at this, but that whiskey an' winnin' that scrap has put him in a good mood, an' he says: *"Bueno,"* an' we all has another drink on it.

Old George he brings out some bacon an' makes some bread an' twists up a right good meal, and 'bout the time he's got 'er ready t' throw out, this here Stevie brother o' mine an' that ranch buyer of a Mullens steps in.

AS Stevie sees this here Woodtick settin' at the table, he a'most has a fit, but I gives him the high sign an' he shuts up. This here Mullens is a sour-lookin' feller, and fu'st thing he does is open the door and the one winder, lettin' in a cold draft.

"I cain't stand no heat. How about a li'l fresh air?" he says. "Damn all hot countries."

"Nice an' cool up here on Sour Crick," I says. "Only have two seasons—winter an' July."

"Mighty warmish for me," says Mullens. "I won't buy no ranch where I cain't sleep ev'ry night under blankets. An' no place where sheep has been. Seems t' me there was a smell o' sheep in the air when I come in here. Who's that *hombre* with the billy-goat whiskers? He looks something like a sheepman t' me."

Old Woodtick he's about to git on his ear at this but I pours him another two fingers in a dishpan hasty an' we pass the jug around.

After supper I make signs to One-Ton and old George to go up an' be ready to put pepper in them goats' whiskers when Pablo has got the herders drunk. Pablo he's been down to git some whiskey outa that keg for the herders. It's cold enough outside to freeze the horns off a muley cow, an' One-Ton an' old George grumbles as they puts on their jackets an' goes outdoors.

"Say, looky here," says Stevie to me private. "What's that Woodtick doin' here? Didn't I tell yuh to keep sheep off this range? Didn't I tell yuh this Mullens feller is death on sheep? I just told him there ain't never been no sheep on this range."

"Leave it tuh me," I says. "I fixed it all up. He ain't never goin' tuh know no diff'rent. By mornin' them sheep will be a thousand miles from here."

I go out tuh fill that half-gallon jug ag'in, an' this here Mullens perduces a deck o' cards an' proposes a li'l friendly game o' poker. We pass the drinks around.

That new jug o' whiskey seems kind o' warmish and heatenin', about like bottled dynamite, but it's mighty welcome, what with a cold breeze siftin' through the cracks of that li'l cabin.

Startin' that poker, it looks like a lucky night for Johnny Hooker. Stevie he don't have much luck, but I got plenty for the whole family. That Mullens he gits peevish and begins to cuss sheepmen, and Woodtick he begins tuh fire up, so I hasty pours Woodtick out another two fingers, dishpan measure.

"Woo-oof!" says Woodtick. "This dang stuff has got a muzzle velocity

o' forty thousan' foot a second. I'm gittin' hotter'n a firecracker.

"Yuh said something, feller, even if yuh does smell like a shearin' pen t' me," agrees this here Mullens. "I thought it was cool up here. Let's have a li'l fresh air in here."

Come tuh think about it, it does seem sorta warm. I git up tuh open the door an' that li'l coot of a brother Stevie, what ain't been drinkin' much, bein' too sore at me, he lets out a yelp.

"What the devil is in yuh fellers?" he yowls. "Want tuh freeze a man tuh death?"

"Freeze!" bawls this here Mullens, as he sheds his coat. "This mesa must be the front door tuh hell. What yuh tryin' t' do—make me believe this mesa has got a cool climate?"

"It'll cool off purt' soon," says Stevie. "An' yuh'll be yellin' fer the door t' be closed an' a fire in the stove."

Me, after sheddin' my jacket, I deals some more cards. Woodtick shows three aces and Mullens three queens ag'in my full house, an' I rake in some more coin.

"This is muh lucky night," I orates. "How 'bout another li'l drink?"

Woodtick an' Mullens, they eyes that likker kind o' suspicious, but gurgles it down. After which both of 'em pulls off their shirts.

"Great sufferin' tomcats!" yowls this here Mullens. "A feller in a climate like this oughta drink nothin' but beer on ice, but they couldn't be no ice in a million miles o' here."

Queer as it may seem, my boots is half full o' sweat, an' I feel like I'm sloshin' around in a pair of galoshes what won't turn water. I'm so warm I got a feelin' there's a volcaner workin' right under that danged cabin, whilst it seems I can see one o' them desert mirages dancin' up an down right 'tween me an Woodtick. If she keeps up like this, all the waterholes'll dry up danged quick.

Well, it ain't my fault if they moved the Yuma, Arizony, climate over on Sour Crick Mesa. I done my part; them sheep, purt' soon they'll be hightailin' it after them goats, headin' fer parts north. By this time Pablo he'll have them sheepherders spifflicated, an' One-Ton an' George'll be red-pepperin' a few of them goats.

We has another round o' drinks, an' Woodtick he makes a dive for the water bucket, whilst that Mullens cowman he lets out a loud "Whoosh" an' remarks he oncet was in a hotter place—one night when he woke up in a room of a hotel what was afire.

"This is sorta onusual," I admits, wipin' off the sweat which is poppin' out through my hide like beads on a Injun moccasin. "But this here climate is treacherous. Warmish one minute, an' the next yuh'll be freezin'. Might seem warm, but fu'st thing yuh know we'll all be down with pneumony."

"Yuh cain't fool me, Hooker," says this here Mullens, stern, as he pulls off his undershirt an' throws it on the floor. "I'll take yore word for it that this is onusual weather. I kin stand a li'l warm spell now an' then on a ranch, jist so they ain't no sheep around tuh—"

GRAN QUIVERA! There's a kind a rumblin' noise like that volcaner under us is gittin' ready tuh bust loose.

"What the devil?" hollers Woodtick and that Mullens together, and then she busts loose. Sounds like there's ten million sheep all tryin' tuh blat at oncet. There's a lot o' yellin' back up toward the bedground an' a racket like a herd o' bull elephants has stampeded through a bunch o' rail fences. Over our heads there's a crash, and through that thin tarpaper roof somethin' comes catapultin' an' lands, kerplunk, right on the table 'tween me and Mullens.

Next thing we know a dang billy goat is lookin' Mr. Mullens right in the eye. Way that goat's snortin' an' sneezin', he shore ain't in no good humor.

"Why, where could that damn' goat 'a' dropped from?" I yells, jist as that goat goes ker-choo oncet more an' makes a dive at that Mul-

lens. An' what does that Mullens *hombre* do but pull his gun?

Wham! He misses the goat, but shoots out the lantern which is hangin' on the wall. My li'l brother Stevie, he lets out a yowl and jumps through the door an' slams it shut, the peanut-head, but that's only what yuh could expect from the brainless coot.

That leaves me an' Woodtick an' that Mullens ranch buyer an' that cussed goat all mixed up in the dark. That goat sneezes ag'in and then somethin' butts me in the middle o' the back an' I land up ag'in the li'l stove, knockin' it down and runnin' one foot through a j'int o' stove pipe.

"Git offa me, dammit!" I kin hear Woodtick bellow, and it sounds like he's unlimbered his gun.

Wham! Wham!

Gran Quivera! Between a goat bumpin' me in the rear and cannons to the left an' right of me, I figgers open country is what I need an great big chunks of it.

I rare up an kick that stove pipe off'n my laig, and starts places, only to come down over the table. Grabbin' out wild, I gits me a couple fistfulls o' goat whiskers.

That's a break. Aimin' tuh pull up that goat an' knock Woodtick an' Mullens unconscious with it, I gives a yank and Woodtick lets out a tur'ble yell.

"Ouch!" he bawls. "Leggo my whiskers 'fore I break yuh in two."

Them guns goes off in there ag'in and a bullet clunks into the stove. This all makes me mighty mad, and when Johnny Hooker gits mad, he's hard tuh git along with. I figger I stood fer about enough, and I lam out a wallop that musta connected with Mullens alongside his ear, fer he lets out a squawk. In the dark Mullens I guess kicks out, fer we hear a thud and then the blat of that goat, an' after that me and Mullens and Woodtick an' the billy go round and round.

There's so much goin' on in the shack I ain't had no time to pay no 'tention to what's goin' on outside, but all the time there's been a heap of blattin' and hollerin' an' shootin' of guns and the ground is shakin' like a earthquake. Next minute, all that is drowned out when about fourteen old yew sheep mixed up with a coupla goats come pilin' through the hole in the roof.

"My sheep, dammit!" yells Woodtick. "Don't nobody hurt my sheep or I'll kill somebody."

ME, I don't say nothin'. I'm too busy huntin' for the door in the dark. It's gittin' about all I kin stand when they shower a whole pack of sheep down on one lone cowman. An' then about fifty or a hundred more flops down through the roof an' flattens me out.

"Goddlemighty!" I bawls. "You, One-Ton and Pablo and Stevie! Git me outa here. I'm bein' buried alive under a mess o' stinkin' woollies.

"Baaa-aa! Blah!" goes all them sheep, and of all the tights I been in, this is the worst. Sheep follers their leaders, and I figger they's still about 1976 left o' Woodtick's flock t' come over the cliff an' drop through that roof. I rares up outa there, throwin' sheep to the side, an', feelin' the winder, tries tuh crawl through it.

Mullens is a-blazin' away with his smokepole regardless, while Woodtick is yellin' frantic:

"Don't shoot! Them's my sheep."

"I ain't tryin' to shoot yore sheep," says this here Mullens in a kind o' muffled tone. "It's the hooman bein's that got me intuh this I'm cravin' tuh let some daylight through."

I don't know how I'll ever git outa there. All I kin remember is goats an' sheep an' sheepherders an' men yellin' an' sheep dogs an' six-guns barkin' an' poppin', an' then another cloudburst o' sheep through that roof.

When I wake up I'm out under the stars with One-Ton throwin' bucketfuls of cold water on me, which is that jughead's idea o' bein' helpful. Off tuh the south I c'n hear blattin' an' baain' which is gittin'

fu'ther off all the time, an' it sure can't git too far off t' suit me.

Woodtick, they say, has got his team hitched up an' is headin' after his lost lambs.

That Mullens, he's rousin' up not far from me, with his shirt off an' all marked up with sheep hoofs. Stevie is pourin' some whiskey down his throat.

Mullens, he tosses Stevie aside like he's a feather an' he stands up.

"Don't nobody say nothin' to me!" he yawps. "Fu'st I was told this was the coldest place this side o' Alasky, an' that there wasn't no sheep ever come near this place. Then fu'st I roast to death an' then on top o' that sheep rain outa the air. Don't try tuh explain nothin'. Don't say a word, nobody, or golram it, I'll kill somebody. Where's my hoss?"

And he hightails it outa there like he's kinda peeved up.

"Lookit that," my li'l brother Stevie roars. "Losin' the sale o' this here Sour Crick Mesa. Didn't I tell yuh to keep off them sheep?"

"An' was it my fault they wasn't off?" I says. "Kin I help it if I git the collaboration of three half-wit gorrilly apes? I told them birds tuh stampede them sheep, but who'd expect they'd stampeede 'em over that bluff down through our shack roof?"

"How could we tell which-a-way they'd stampede?" asks One-Ton. "All yuh said was tuh red pepper them goats. Yuh oughta be glad we was able tuh red pepper 'em a-tall. Old George lost the can o' red pepper in the dark an' if Pablo hadn't been smart enough tuh gather a bunch o' dry pimenta pods an' make some powder, we never would o' got them goats started on their way. Pablo, he's a smart guy, Pablo is."

"He is, is he?" I squalls at that. "Fergit it. An' I'd like tuh know what got intuh that whiskey? I got a hunch that's what made us all git so sweated up in that shack. It's plenty chilly out here."

Pablo lets out a snicker.

"Me plenty smart," he brags on hisself. "Theese sheepherders, I was afraid they weel no dreenk that wheesky. The *Mejicanos* like for the wheesky she should be hot. So me, I meex some of those pimenta powder in your keg of wheesky so eet weel be warm for those sheepherders."

SUFFERIN' bobcats! It ain't no wonder me an' Woodtick an' that bird Mullens got so steamed up. Whiskey with wild chili in it. Kin yuh beat it?

That's the trouble with the cow biz. No matter how smart yuh may be, yuh simply can't furnish enough brains for the outfit o' cowyaps yuh hire for yore outfit. Me, I lays intuh that bunch, an' when I'm done cussin', I find that old George has made off with that keg of whiskey.

That's the last straw. No co-operation a-tall. It all goes tuh show yuh kin hire men tuh work fer yuh, but yuh shore can't hire their brains, account the damn knotheads simply ain't got none!

How Well Do You Know Your West?

Test yourself—see whether you can answer these five questions. If you can't, take a peek at page 124.

1. Why did many Western gunfighters dislike pearl-handled guns?
2. What famous Indian scout was nicknamed "Pahaska" by the redskins?
3. In what national park are the Bridal Veil Falls?
4. Where is the Colorado Desert and how large is it?
5. When was the Pony Express Mail Service established? Between what cities did it operate?

BULLET JUSTICE

A SIX-GUN SANDY ADVENTURE IN PICTURES

"Reckon I'll be headin' back tuh my ranch," says Matt Daily as he walks along with the young sheriff. "Glad tuh have seen yuh, Matt," remarks Sandy. "Yuh don't git intuh town often." Behind them a sinister masked figure appears. *Bang!* A gun roars and Daily collapses.

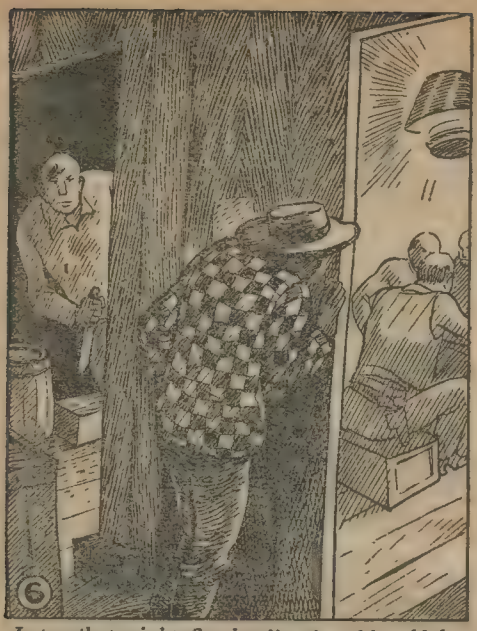
Sandy whirls, hands streaking for his guns. The heavy Colt in his right hand booms! Flame stabs the night as the sheriff fires at a fleeting figure. The bullet tears into the side of a door—and the masked man escapes from the sheriff. From a distance, comes the sound of hoofs.

"No use tuh try tuh follow him," opines Sandy. "He's got too much start." The sheriff searches about, hoping to find something which will give him a clue to the murderer. He finds a cartridge shell.

Sandy drops the shell into his pocket and starts toward his office. He has almost reached it when he hears a swiftly galloping horse. The masked rider appears! The killer's gun roars and the sheriff falls.

Sandy's friend, old Jed Peters, rushes to the motionless form. "Pretend that I'm dead," Sandy tells him in a whisper. "If the killer thinks I'm gone he might come out in the open." Jed carries Sandy to shelter.

(Turn page)



Later that night Sandy disguises himself in a checkered shirt, old hat and mask. He goes into the saloon through the back way. He discovers four hard-faced men plotting to clean up the town. "It will be easy with th' sheriff dead," says one. Then—Sandy is seen! A desperado silently approaches!

"Listening, huh!" snarls a rough voice. "Th' boss won't like that at all!" As the man with the knife leaps at Sandy the young sheriff's fist slashes out. He catches the man on the jaw, knocks him back. The knife drops to the floor. Sandy dashes away before the others learn what's happened.

It is dawn when Sandy gets back to his office. He now knows that it is useless to pretend he is dead any longer. Sam Larks, a rancher, appears. He is very excited. "I'll be the next victim," he says. "I know it."

Sandy assures the rancher he will get all possible protection. Suddenly there is the sound of gunfire in the street. "Come on, Jed," shouts Sandy. 'They're robbing the bank!" The sheriff and old Jed rush out, guns roaring.

Sandy dashes for his horse and Jed does likewise. "We got one of them," shouts the old plainsman. "Only three left now." Sandy fires as they race after the outlaws. Another man goes down—but the two others ride hard!

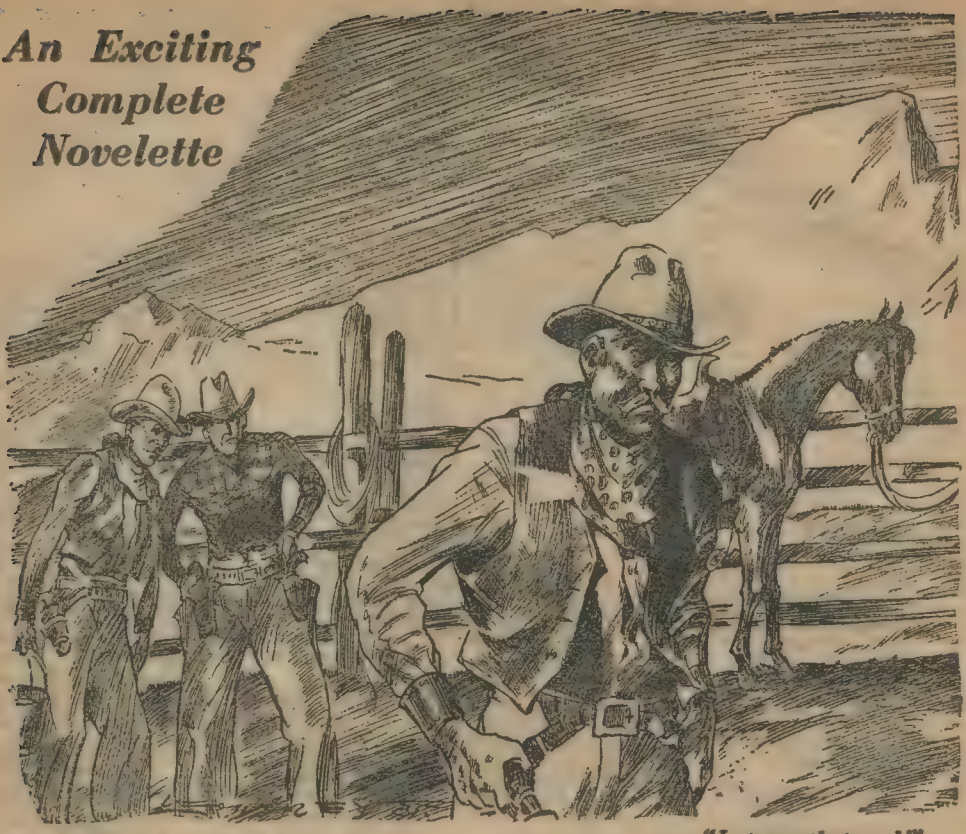
Swiftly Sandy finds himself drawing closer to the two men. He fires and then he realizes that his guns are empty. "No time tuh reload now," he murmurs. He thrusts the guns into his holsters, swings his rope. The noose settles over the two bandits and they are jerked from their saddles.

"Looks like th' game's up fer yuh *hombres*," says Sandy as he marches his prisoners back toward the town. Larks appears, claims that Sandy has pursued the wrong men. They dismount. "Where's Jed?" asks Larks. "Don't know," says Sandy. "Haven't seen him fer some time. Hurt maybe."

"If anybody hurt him, I'll deliver bullet justice!" shouts Larks—producing an automatic. "Yore a liar," exclaims Sandy—"you killed Daily! Yore gun's the only automatic in town and I've got the ejected shell in my pocket!" Larks whirls angrily, threatens Sandy at gun-point!

Sandy stares at death! Meanwhile, Jed has stolen up behind the bandit leader. Suddenly Jed fires—and Larks goes down. "It sure is bullet justice," says Sandy. "Larks was boss of th' outlaws and shot Daily and now he's had a bit of his own medicine." Jed nods as they start back to town with their prisoners.

An Exciting Complete Novelette



"Let go that rod!"

TRAIL DRIVE

CHAPTER I

Lead Trouble

A DEFINITE vibration raced for a moment along Menn Toleson's nerves as he heard the voice outside the blacksmith shop. It was neither surprise nor alarm that instantly stilled him; it was rather a warning, a presaging of trouble, an omen of conflict that must eventually take place.

The voice was that of Harve Benson.

Toleson's hand dropped with an automatic gesture toward his side, but his lips thinned as he checked the move. He hadn't worn a gun for months, not since he had left that riding job on the San Simon, and the leather about his thighs now was an apron, not chaps.

Through the open door of the shop he could see no one, see only the sun-bathed corral yard of the Running W. The voice had come from the right of that door.

"Not one head of stock, McNamara, do yuh take off this ranch!"

Toleson remained standing with almost breathless expectancy as he waited for the reply of the ranch owner. If he guessed Tom McNamara rightly he would not take this bulldozing lying down, not weakly submit to Harve Benson.

The owner of the Running W did

It Was a Grim Battle of Man Against

By ANSON HARD

Author of "Gun Wolves," "Sure Shot Haggerty," etc.

commanded Toleson

GUNS

not reply immediately. A tenseness, palpable even to the listener in the blacksmith shop, spread in the still afternoon air.

"I reckon you don't own me, Benson, ner my stock. I don't savvy yuh givin' me orders."

"You'll savvy, McNamara, and you'll savvy plenty. I come to collect what you owe me, and yuh can't pay. I'll collect, all right. That's why I'm warning yuh about movin' stock."

"I'll pay yuh, Benson, the minute I ship my herd and get the money for it. There's no sense in bein' unreasonable. Yuh'll get yore money."

Toleson's fingers tightened on the hammer he had been swinging before

Man—With Death for the Loser!

Harve Benson's arrival. An anger was rising in him. He had no desire to be interfering in the affairs of McNamara, but the peaceable Tom was not wise to the ways of Benson. In addition to his demands concerning stock and money, Harve was bent on more serious trouble, taunting, provoking McNamara to some hostile act. Menn knew too well the ways of Benson.

Toleson moved silently nearer the door. He could see a squat shadow etched upon the ground. He could see the bulging outline of Benson's right elbow, his hand throwing a shadow like a bear's paw. Harve, proud of his "leather-slapping," was egging the slower McNamara to a draw.

"Tryin' to stall me, huh?" went on the gruff voice. "That note reads payable on demand, and I'm demandin', see? Yuh come across with the money or I'll take my pay in cows. Yuh don't get by with a thing, McNamara, not one little thing."

"I'm not tryin' to git by with anything," returned the other. The pitch of his voice was a note higher, heated by the flush of anger that was mounting in the ranch owner's throat. "An', furthermore, I'm not standin' for any talk like yuh're givin' me, Benson. Yuh're insinuatin' that I'm tryin' t' get by with somethin', that I ain't honest. Yuh got no authority for makin' such statements. Yuh got no legal right—"

"Legal right? I'll show yuh mighty *pronto* what rights I got. I'm packin' enough authority on my hip to show yuh crooked ranchers—"

"Enough there, Benson. I meet a man square as long as he's square with me; but when yuh come talkin' war talk—"

"War, eh? Then war she is—"

Menn Toleson, gripping the hammer, was moving stealthily through the door. The two outside would be grabbing leather in a moment. And Tom McNamara hadn't a chance.

The bellow of Harve's voice had risen on the last words. The shadow of the paw hand crooked into a claw. It was but inches from the gun butt.

The roaring words came out again, distracting to an opponent.

"Why, yuh— Don't yuh try to draw on me!"

Everything at that instant seemed to solidify into a still picture. Tom McNamara's eyes opened and remained wide. The shadow of Benson became immovable grey, stationary as a sepia drawing; and beyond his shadow blended another, arm outstretched.

"Let go that rod," commanded Tom Toleson grimly, "an' reach fer the clouds!"

THE round boss of Menn's hammer was pressing into Harve Benson's back.

For seconds the tableau held, seconds that stretched into minutes to Mess Toleson. The round steel of the hammer was not shaped like the muzzle of a gun. Would the man before him recognize the trick?

A rippling twitch ran up the muscles of Harve's back, jerked the shoulders a trifle from their slouch, passed like a wave to beat upon the drawing man's brain.

Benson's gun was half out of the holster, his thumb cocking the hammer back. A fifth of a second later and Menn would have been too late to prevent the shot. His command had come simultaneously with Harve's grab for the gun, and Benson's muscles had gone half through the motion before will stopped them.

A chill uncertainty surged through Toleson. The burly neck and bullet head of Harve Benson roused in him an impulsive dread. He did not need to see the square, scowling face; he knew well enough the arrogance and brutality plastered upon it. And he knew too that if the other sensed the trick he would whirl and kill with a furious emptying of the gun.

Toleson's muscles became rigid, setting themselves for possible action if Benson refused to obey the command. For one flashing instant Menn felt his trick had failed as he saw a swift lurch of Harve's shoulders. He must crowd in, block if possible the gun; trust to some action from McNamara.

Even then his chances would be slim. He knew the terrific muzzle blast of a large-bored gun. It would unbalance him, shock him, even if the bullets failed. Had he tried a fool's trick?

But the clawed hand left the gun, come up to the height of the shoulders, and the Colt, thrown slightly outward by the move, fell to the ground. Harve's brown, hairy fingers lifted beside his face, hesitated there as if bracketing the surly countenance.

McNamara's hand was on his own gun. He did not draw. There was no need to pull against a disarmed enemy; but a certain flash of relief mingled with the anger in Tom's eyes.

"Jest step forward and keep them hands up," again commanded Toleson. "An' don't be too keen on turnin' around." He scooped up the fallen gun. "Jest fer the moment I'll appropriate yore gun. I ain't very good with a hammer noway."

Benson whirled like a cornered steer. Not alone the fact that he had been tricked, but recognition of the voice swelled the veins in his neck.

"You! Menn Toleson! Why, yuh—"

He did not add the words of the imprecation, though their meaning ran unsaid in his eyes. His own gun, unwaveringly held in the hand of the supposed blacksmith, was less than a yard away. The black eye of the Colt was a silencer.

"Yes, it's me, Benson."

Assurance, bluster, came back to the big cowman. "Yuh can't get by with this. I run yuh out of one neck of the woods, an' I'll run yuh out of another."

"You're mistaken. I never *run*. I left of my own accord, and I come to *this* neck o' the woods of my own accord. Now, I reckon it's yore turn to get goin'. *Drift!*"

"I'll get you for this, Menn Toleson. Yuh butted in where yuh got no business."

"I figure different. It's anybody's business—stoppin' murder."

The last words were said in a voice too low for McNamara to hear, but their effect upon Benson was unveiled. The dark face became livid, and the eyes pits of deep fire.

The Running W ranch owner strode forward. This trouble had taken a turn totally unexpected. The quick shift of the conflict, the sudden defiance of Harve and Toleson came as a surprise. This young fellow he had hired as a blacksmith a couple of days before had tossed in his lariat with a vengeance. Little as he had heard, McNamara knew there was more behind the scene than prevention of gunplay.

This young blacksmith had cut in on a dealt game. Tom wasn't sure yet that he welcomed his intervention; but the play had been started—he must keep it going. His hard, tanned face with its network of wrinkles showed no change of expression as he eyed the big Benson determinedly.

"There's yore horse, Harve. Git goin'. Yuh talk business with me reasonable or stay over the boundary line. Hereafter I'll be prepared for yore kind, so don't ever try to buffalo me again. Move!"

Benson's hands came down, and he gave one hot look at the man he had a few minutes previously threatened. Involuntarily his lip twisted in a wolfish curl as they reflected some thought in his mind. He turned wordlessly and stalked toward his horse; but as he swung into leather he voiced a parting threat.

"I'll be meetin' yuh, Menn Toleson, and yuh, too, McNamara. This affair ain't over yet—it ain't even started. An' from now on I'm dealin' all the play. Chaw on that, Toleson, you back fighter!"

HE gave the horse a rip of the spurs and was gone.

Toleson, rolling the gun he had taken from the irate rider, watched him gallop down the trail. "Up to his old tricks again, eh?" he commented.

McNamara stared at his new employee.

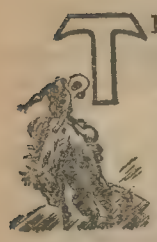
"I don't know why yuh cut into this deal, *hombre*, but yuh shore

didn't give yoreself no pat hand. Yuh drew trouble, lead trouble, when yuh braced Harve Benson."

"And don't I know that," returned Menn tersely.

CHAPTER II

The Range Hog



TROUBLE! It seemed to have fallen on the ranch like a sinister flood. The brightness of the sun dimmed with menace, losing the warmth of a moment before, as if the cosmic wizardry of nature reflected the moods of man. Toleson felt the change; McNamara felt it; and for seconds they stared.

Tom's hand came up at length to drag at his greying mustache, his eyes narrowing as he swung them again toward his employer.

"Yuh know him?" he questioned. "I thought yuh was new around these parts. What are yuh tryin' to do—work some kind of a shenanigan?"

Menn tossed the appropriated gun onto the workbench. "Not exactly, Mister McNamara, I ain't. I haven't seen that *hombre* in two years."

"Yeah? Well, you seemed mighty well acquainted with one another."

"We are. Benson used to run a spread in Ector County. That's where I learned his tricks." The young man turned to face the other squarely, the frankness of his eyes bespeaking sincerity. "That's why I shoved in my iron. I wasn't tryin' to snoop, but I couldn't help overhearin' yore conversation before he got to speaking hot and eggin' yuh on for gun trouble. Kinda got yuh in a hole, ain't he?"

McNamara hesitated as if doubting the advisability of discussing the affair, but the straightforwardness of Menn Toleson's manner inspired confidence.

"Yes," he admitted, "he has."

"Owe him money on a note, don't yuh?"

"Yes, that's right."

And he's jumpin' yuh unexpectedly and all at once fer payment?"

"Yes."

"Yeah, he would. Now see if I can't outline the case accurately. Yuh needed money and he lent it to yuh. He was real friendly, and told yuh to take yore time payin' it back. Then, out of a blue sky, he gets heated and demands payment, and he makes that demand just prior to yore makin' a shipment of stock. Am I right?"

"Yuh are. But I don't savvy how yuh got that much information out of the conversation yuh overheard."

"I didn't. I'm figurin' on cases he's worked before. He worked it on my dad. Do yuh know what he's goin' to do?"

"Not for sure. I got ideas."

"I can tell yuh exactly. He'll get a writ of attachment and walk off with yore herd. He stands in with the sheriff. I saw them buddyin' together in Wake City."

McNamara rubbed his chin reflectively. "Not much sense in that scheme. I kin sell the cattle and pay him, or he kin attach an equivalent amount of stock. It all amounts t' the same thing."

"Not by a long shot!" Menn's words snapped. "Who'll appraise the stock? Him and the sheriff. He'll take three times the amount o' cows he's entitled tuh, an' trust to gunnin' yuh if yuh object. He gets by with it. That's why he works the attachment scheme instead of suing yuh."

"H'm, you seem purty wise to his schemin'." The ranch owner again tugged at his mustache as he pondered this information. "What do yuh figger I oughta do?"

Menn's answer came instantly.

"Beat him to the pole. Drive the herd to Wake City and sell it. Then slap him with the money."

"No good." McNamara's voice dropped dispiritedly. "No good at all. I do my dealin' at Elkville, the county seat. He'd stop us from gettin' through."

"We kin always fight," suggested Menn. "Since that new railroad has come into Wake City there are shippers there who are ready to buy stock at regular prices. Yuh see, I

teamed fer three months on that new railroad before I come up here lookin' fer work. I took this smithin' job because yuh didn't have a ridin' job open, but I reckon there's somethin' else I ought to tell yuh, Mister McNamara."

"Yeah? Well, git it off yore chest."

"Mebbe yuh think I'm huntin' trouble. Mebbe I am and mebbe I'm not. I won't be startin' anything with Harve Benson unless he starts it with me—which I figure he will. But he's more or less responsible fer me bein' here in Presidente County."

"Yeah?"

"Yuh see, he pulled this same trick on my dad in Ector County; ruined him. Dad lost the ranch and everythin'. An'—an' he died shortly after from disappointment and worry. He loved that ranch, an' it sorta broke his heart. I never could help but feelin' Harve Benson as much as murdered him."

"The polecat! It's the same as if he did."

"Thanks fer seein' it that way. I left Ector County after that. Benson claimed he run me out. He didn't. I wanted to leave and forget. I couldn't forget. I drifted for two years, but I finally drifted back to Ector County. I found out that Benson had sold his ranch and bought the Slash Two up here. I sorta trailed this way. There yuh have it."

McNamara's faded eyes were sympathetic.

"I can't say as I blame yuh for hatin' him. But yuh can't buck Benson alone. He's too powerful fer yuh. He wouldn't give yuh a break."

"Not if he could help it, he wouldn't. But I kin shore put a spoke in his wheel in this play he's working on yuh. We kin stop his legal stealin' if we prod your herd through to Wake City. Let me explain my scheme, and I think I can convince yuh."

"Well, I kin always listen, son," replied McNamara noncommittally.

Two cowhands of the Slash Two spread, spying upon the Running W ranch of Tom McNamara from the benchlands to the east, were surprised that evening to see a herd of longhorns pouring into the grassy bottom just south of the Running W ranchhouse.

From the extent of the dust kicked up by the trotting steers, they knew this to be a fair-sized herd, five hundred head, perhaps; and five hundred, they also knew, was the maximum of marketable stock on the Running W. They watched intently as the herd spread to feed under the vigilant eyes of horsemen.

BILL HARMAN, acting foreman for Harve Benson, chuckled sourly as he observed the operations of his neighbors. Through his binoculars he saw the chuck wagon being loaded.

"Dumb fools," he commented to Slim Cochrane, "they'll be headin' off fer Elkville, and they'll run smack into Benson on his way back. He'll have a sheriff with him and that attachment, and they'll shore slap onto them steers. Then where'll McNamara be? Ridin' herd on a chuck wagon an' nothin' else."

Slim flipped away a cigarette stub with an agile finger. "Benson has shore got a head on him," he said with definite admiration. "He shore does figger things out."

The two men watched until darkness completely settled over the sageland. Thereafter, Harman rode away, but Slim's cigarettes continued to glow intermittently until drowsiness forced him to stretch out under a clump of wild locust, with only his saddle for a pillow.

The sun was not yet above the blue hills to the east when Slim threw his saddle upon his picketed cayuse. In record time he coiled the tie-rope and was tearing off the benchland with the pony at a dead run. He had news for Harman and plenty of it.

Like a great, flat snake the Running W herd was twisting over the sage bottom—not toward Elkville, but south and east straight for the Slash Two range. Behind the crawling serpent of a herd the chuck wagon jolted along like the disconnected rattle of a diamond-back.

Slim knew that his employer's scheme had struck a snag; for, while the Running W herd was rolling southward, Harve Benson was on his way to the county seat, Elkville, sixty miles to the north.

CHAPTER III

Desperate Plans!

McNAMARA pulled up beside Menn who was riding point on the herd. The old ranchman had been convinced by Toleson's scheme to drive the herd to Wake City, but he was not allowing himself much optimism.

"We can't get through," he averred, "even if Harve ain't here. Harman'll be on hand, and him and Benson are just like finger and thumb."

"Snake Coulee is supposed to be an open trail, ain't it?" asked Menn.

"Yes, but Benson owns land all around it, and I guess he thinks he owns the trail, too. I don't put anything past him, not after the way he showed his hand yesterday." The memory of Benson's gun threat rankled the old man. "The idea of him tryin' to bully me with a shootin'-iron."

Menn cast a look back over the herd. The cattle, heads lowered, were plodding steadily along under the glowing disc of the sun. It was mid-afternoon, and the herd had covered fifteen miles. Immediately ahead, spreading out like forbidden limbo, lay the Two Slash range.

Toleson was estimating possibilities. Besides himself and the owner, who acted as his own foreman, there were three dependable riders, men that McNamara had brought with him when he took over the Running W more than a year before.

A fourteen-year-old boy was wrangling the small remuda, and a colored cook held sway in the chuck wagon. The value of the latter two in a fight—provided the issue resolved itself into one of force—could not be reckoned. Five men then at best, barely enough to manage the herd, and Benson with a dozen ready gunslingers on his payroll.

The prospects looked none too good.

"I think I'll send the kid up to scout in the coulee," McNamara suggested. "We might be in a bad way if we got too far in and found ourselves blocked."

"Good idea," agreed Menn.

Toleson felt certain that the Slash Two outfit would block the trail, and he could have told his employer to begin with that it would be a matter of smashing through; but he did not want to presume too much with McNamara. The ranch owner had accepted the scheme as a possibility, but he still entertained some doubts.

An hour later a thin patch of dust rapidly approaching told them that Jimmy Hinson, the kid wrangler, was coming back to report. Like a courier of disquieting news, the kid was coming fast. McNamara, his brows furrowed, rode forward to meet him. Menn, from the gestures of the two, knew that the worst could be expected.

McNamara, riding back, broke the news abruptly.

"The Slash Two outfit has thrown a fence across the trail. The kid says he saw four guards with rifles."

"Yeah?" Toleson turned to the boy who had followed McNamara. "Where they got this fence, Jim?"

"Just beyond the sinkhole by the sycamores," answered the boy.

Menn looked at the boy appraisingly. Jim was a husky, brown-skinned lad, just in the rapid growth period. He looked intelligent and range-wise beyond his years.

"Can yuh shoot?" asked Menn.

The boy started an abashed reply, but McNamara answered for him.

"I've seen him mark dollars at fifty yards with a Winchester."

"Good. Mebbe we kin use some of that sharpshooting yet."

Jim grinned, boylike. A bond of sympathy had already developed between the new hand and the horse wrangler. Toleson now directed his remarks to his employer.

"There's a trail over the Espinosa Ridge we could use if we have tuh,

but it's rough and would delay us a day getting into Wake City. As I figure it we got to get there day after tomorrow morning. That'll mean some night driving. Benson can't get back to his outfit with a sheriff before late tomorrow night, and it will be toward noon before he can make Wake City. All we got to do is beat him. Once yuh sell the cattle, the joke's on Benson."

"I don't know about that," McNamara slowly shook his head. "Harve's got no pity on horseflesh. It's a gamble whether we kin beat him or not."

"It's worth tryin'. It's a dead cinch we can't do it if we go over the ridge. If I take Jim here and agree to cut down the fence, can yuh an' the other riders put the herd through the coulee?"

McNAMARA looked at Menn with disbelief.

"Yuh can't do it," he stated. "They'd riddle yuh like a colander."

"Mebbe." Toleson turned toward the boy. "Jim, will you ride with me tonight?"

The boy's chin came up proudly. "I'll ride," he said.

The herd was bedded down in a grassy flat a mile or more west of the sinkhole. Here, to all appearances, it would spend the night. Just such an impression McNamara and Toleson wanted to give to the men who, they felt certain, were watching all movements from afar. Benson's men would look for no clash before morning and would, consequently, be lax in vigilance during the night.

The herd had fed until dusk and, tired from the first day's grind under a broiling sun, had bedded down contentedly in the small flat. At the east end of the natural meadow the walls of the valley closed, the bench-land swinging in until a solid wall was formed with the exception of Snake Coulee.

This cut through the hills could always be depended upon as a good trail; and now, after weeks of dry weather, even the sinkhole would be solid as a dance floor. Only Benson's riflemen and the barricade would prevent a straight drive through.

When the night was completely dark, Toleson rode off alone to reconnoiter. He slipped carefully away so that no spying eyes might divine his intention. Unless Jim had been careless on his first ride into the canyon, the Slash Two boys had every reason to believe that McNamara and his outfit were blissfully unaware of the surprise that would greet them on the morrow.

Shortly after ten o'clock, Menn was back. The cowhands, Ellery and Bosart, were slowly circling the herd as night guards, but Tim Bowery, top rope hand, was present when Menn divulged his plan to McNamara.

"There are not more'n three or four men at the fence now," he explained, "and it's not much of a fence at that. About four strands of wire, looped to the trees at the sides, and with a couple of posts in the trail. Harman is probably figgering on defendin' the place with guns, knowin' we're too short-handed to fight through. Workin' a bluff, mebbe, to send us back over Espinosa Ridge. We got to get through. I say to stampede the herd. Even at the worst it'll bust through the fence and no three or four men can stop it."

Tim Bowery spoke up:

"It'd probably go through, all right, but a passel of critters is likely to pile up at the barricade, and McNamara'd lose a bunch of good beef. And a lot more 'ud git crippled by the barb-wire. I wouldn't want a herd to go loco in that canyon. The walls ain't too steep, and they'd climb 'em like cats. I saw a herd do that once up in Baca County."

"Then it's up to me and Jim," declared Toleson definitely, "provided cooky'll give me his ax. You start the herd at one o'clock—hell-bent. It'll take ten minutes to make the sinkhole. The minute the herd starts, Jim and me go into action. We'll agree to remove the fence. What d'yuh say, McNamara?"

"It don't look like no shore-fire bet to me, Toleson," answered the ranch owner slowly. "Still, I'd rather see the herd trample itself to death than fer Benson to get 'em. I'm a peaceful man and I'm humane, but I been gettin' madder every minute fer the last two days. Give him the ax, cook."

CHAPTER IV

Stampede

NEARLY full moon, now well up in the eastern sky, spread down an aura of ghostly light. Menn and the kid horse-wrangler lay in the brush on the south side of the coulee. Seventy-five yards below them and to the east the barbwire fence was visible. Two men were plainly in view, squatting on the bank at the left side, smoking cigarettes discreetly cupped in their hands. Menn knew that one, if not two more, lay asleep farther up the gully.

Toleson looked at his watch. It was only a few minutes till one. He gave his final instructions to Jim. Both had brought Winchesters, and Toleson also wore his .45.

"We got about forty cartridges each," whispered Menn, "and since we're firing to scare, we might as well have a target. Think yuh kin hit that post on the left?"

"I reckon I kin," answered Jim.

"All right, I'll take the other one. I'm movin' to that bit of brush over there. Wait for me to give the first shot, then cut loose and pump lead, but take time enough to make each slug count. Aim fer two or three inches above the ground. Don't expect to cut the post off, but twenty or thirty slugs will shore splinter 'em. Them jaspers down there will start shootin' back, but don't pay no attention to 'em. There ain't much chance of them hittin' us here. When I stop firin', then yuh start pottin' at their flashes, see? Save a few shells to crack down on any *hombre* who fires on the herd as it goes by. Understand all that?"

"Yes, sir."

"Now remember, I'm dependin' on yuh. Yuh stay right here until the herd gets by."

"Yes, sir."

Toleson slipped noiselessly to his own position. He would have felt more secure if he had had a seasoned gunfighter with him, but he could not take another man away from the herd. The four drivers would have all they could do. He had to gamble on the boy.

The next few minutes were not going to be sweet ones. The fence guards would unlimber their rifles the moment guns began to bark on the bluff above, and Benson's men were all gun-hands. He glanced at his watch again: the herd should be starting.

With his ear to the ground Toleson listened. No encouraging sounds came from the west. He should be able to hear the rumble of the herd almost from the moment of its starting, a rapid, vibrating drum of hundreds of hoofs. Then it came: first a confused medley of sound like the far-away stirring of insects; then a quick increase in volume, a swelling roar bursting out of the west like summer thunder.

The two visible watchers at the fence leaped to their feet and stood listening, peering intently into the darkness. One of them called.

Two more men came trotting out of the brush. The four stood quiet as graven images. Then came voices and quick, emphatic gesturing. One of the men started up the coulee bank, digging his toes into the yielding dirt. He was quickly lost to sight on the brushy slope, but Menn guessed his purpose.

"Goin' fer help, eh?" murmured Toleson. "Keep goin', *hombre*. Yore ranchhouse is just three miles away."

But Toleson was wrong: the man was not heading for the Slash Two ranchhouse. A horse and rider shot out of the brush a hundred yards away, speeding across an open table of benchland nearly opposite to McNamara's watcher.

Menn's brain hummed for a moment at this unexpected maneuver,

but comprehension crystallized. More of Benson's men must be camped near. This rider was heading for Espinosa ridge. Then Harman must be guarding the ridge trail as well as Snake Coulee, and the nearest point of the trail was little more than a mile away. Reinforcements to the fence guard would be dangerous.

Toleson's Winchester came up in a steady swing, moving along with the racing target. He shoved the front sight a little ahead of the running horse and squeezed the trigger. The mustang went down headfirst, and the rider shot over the horn in a hurtling arc.

At Menn's shot, Jim began emptying his Winchester. Toleson cursed inaudibly. He had overlooked at the instant his instructions to the boy. His scheme depended upon exact timing, and he feared that the kid wrangler had started his fusillade too early. Now that Jim had started, Menn dared not slow down the tempo of the surprise or the men below would have time to organize resistance. All must be rushed now in the hope that the herd would arrive in time.

Menn lined his rifle sights on the base of the right post and began firing. At the first smash of bullets into the valley below, the fence guards had leaped for cover. Three rifles began to crack from the brush of the gully.

Toleson's ears were dinned by the crackle of continuous detonations. Jim, fifty yards away, was steadily pulling the trigger. Bullets were snarling above the attackers like hissing whiplashes. One nipped a bit from the crown of Menn's *sombrero*.

He disregarded these slugs and kept his sights on the ground line of the barricade post and fired until the magazine of his gun was empty. He loaded rapidly and emptied the rifle again. The barrel grew hot to his touch.

Above the rattle of the firing he kept his ears tuned for the noise of the coming herd. He could allow himself only a few minutes for the removal of the barrier, and these in the very teeth of the stampede when the guards below would be falling back before the wild mêlée of horns.

The roaring advance was now drawing nearer, swelling up the coulee like the diapason of a gigantic organ, rolling over the staccato barking of the rifles as a huge kettle drum might drown out lesser instruments. A half-mile, a quarter-mile away! Now was the time. He dropped the hot rifle and seized the ax.

"GIVE it to 'em, Jim!" he yelled, and slid over the bluff's edge onto the shelving brushy wall of the canyon.

He made no effort to conceal himself, but rushed straight for the sycamores. Flashes from the guards' rifles winked out before him, but the kid from the cliff above was answering shot for shot. Menn reached the shadow of the trees and found the ends of the wire looped and twisted about a smooth, grey bole. He swung the ax mightily once, twice, three times, and felt the keen blade snip through the tough wire.

A fourth and last swing severed the final loop. Tearing the wire ends free from about the bole, he leaped now for the center of the gully.

The herd was barely two hundred yards away, wild eyes gleaming in the moonlight. Menn made a swing at the base of the nearest post, then heaved against it with his shoulder. It popped and fell sagging, held at an angle by the wire. The bullets had splintered, weakened the base.

The second post was easier. The lead had eaten out one side like the gnawing of a rodent, and one swing of the ax propelled by the desperation of the moment clicked it off. The barrier fell flat.

A stinging slap carried the ax from Menn's hand. He heard the angry whine of a ricocheting bullet. Benson's men had spotted him and were after blood. He would not have time for dragging the wires aside, but the strands were flat on the ground and the posts would weight

them, preventing them from coiling.

Toleson made a plunge for the shade of the sycamores just as a hot iron clapped on his shoulder and knocked him flat. He crawled far enough up the shelving wall to be safe from the pounding hoofs and lay almost breathless while the herd rumbled past.

CHAPTER V

"We Kin Try!"

THE stampeded cattle, after their two-mile rush through the coulee, were easily collected in the flats beyond the ridge. For McNamara and his riders there had been no great difficulties after the steers had been headed into the gorge.

Barbique, the colored cook, his eyeballs shining white, stuck by the chuck wagon and brought it through at a gallop on the tail of the rushing herd. Toleson alone of all the party had suffered injury, as the revolver bullet had plowed a furrow, shallow but painful, across his back. He gave the wound no treatment, however, until the herd had arrived at Mantell Creek, miles from Snake Coulee and well beyond Benson's range.

Here they found that the bullet had raked the left shoulder blade, but not sufficiently to incapacitate Toleson.

He could still do his share of the riding.

Benson's men gave no trouble after the herd had swept past the barricade, though a few scattered shots had come from the retreating men. The absence of their boss had left the men temporarily without guidance.

During the ensuing forenoon while the herd was covering the last miles toward Mantell Creek, a horseman was seen now and then in the distance. They were keeping the herd under observation but were attempting no further violence.

"We haven't licked Benson yet by a whole lot," declared McNamara. "We got through by the short cut, thanks to you, Toleson, but we still got to beat him to Wake City. It's still thirty miles o' drivin'."

"Yuh're altogether too right," admitted Menn, "but we still got a chance. We kin let the critters water and feed here until dusk. Then we can get them started and ride them hard. We ought to make Wake City by the middle of the mornin'."

McNamara looked dubiously back toward Benson's range as he nodded his head.

The herd swung on through the night and into the chill grey hours of the morning. Men, hoarse from shouting, urged on the stragglers through the swirling dawn. Barbique, who had driven the chuck wagon on ahead, passed out coffee and hot bread to the men on the run.

No one stopped longer than to swallow a tin of java. Miles still lay between the toiling animals and Wake City. But with sunlight came new hope, and even McNamara smiled optimistically.

"I shore appreciate yore help," the old cattleman said to Toleson.

"Thanks," replied Menn dryly, "but it don't please yuh more'n it does me to snag Harve Benson."

Wake City shimmered at last in the sunlight before them. The twin, glistening streaks of steel, the new station, the recently constructed shipping pens, the cattle cars upon the siding, presented an agreeable picture. Only a mile lay between them and the new railroad town; only a few minutes between them and success.

But luck was not ready to light upon their standards. Three horsemen came over the ridge to the north, galloping hard. Jim was the first to notice this pursuit, and he raced forward from his trailing remuda to give the alarm.

McNamara, usually careful of speech, released an explosive oath.

"Benson with the sheriff! We can't make it," he added despairingly.

"We kin try!" shouted Menn. "Let's give 'em a race for it."

Shirts came off, and with these flapping wildly and with guns barking, the five riders began to stir the herd. Once the fright started, it seemed to pass by conduction from steer to steer.

Terror vitalized the herd, sent it thundering forward. Menn and Tim Bowery, riding abreast of the leaders, hats and shirts flapping like furies, guided the rush toward the main street.

Citizens, hearing the rumble, came pouring out of the buildings, only to be driven back by the wave of driven cattle. Front stoops crashed; ponies tore loose from hitchracks and galloped snorting away.

Like a rush of flood waters, the herd swept through the town and was finally circled and brought to a stop east of the town beyond the new shipping pens.

And through the trailing dust kicked up by the herd, Harve Benson and his companions spurred furiously into Wake City. The big rancher's lips were crimped in a gloating, malicious smile.

Menn donned his shirt again, and he and McNamara rode slowly back toward the office of Tobe Hunter, cattle buyer. Barring the street in front of the building were three men, Benson's hulking form standing out in front of the other two. The Slash Two foreman, Harman, and a slack-mouthed individual wearing a badge completed the trio.

Keen disappointment and chagrin raced over McNamara's face. The race had been lost. Benson and the officer had arrived in time to prevent any negotiations. Menn saw this expression on his employer's face, but decided for the moment to keep silent.

Benson eyed sneeringly the advancing men, then turned toward Tobe Hunter, who was standing in the doorway of his office.

"Yuh buyin' them cattle?" demanded Harve gruffly.

Hunter was not perturbed by the growling voice. "I can't say," he replied. "I buy cattle."

"Well, if yuh do, yuh buy 'em from me. They're mine. The deputy here's got an attachment for them steers, sealed, certified, and ready to levy. These jaspers tried to run 'em away, but they weren't quick enough to beat me."

McNamara was controlling himself with effort.

"If Hunter will buy these cattle," he spoke up, "I'll have him make a separate check, payable to yuh, covering my note. There'll be no need to serve attachment papers."

"Oh, will yuh?" sneered Benson. "I say yuh won't! That attachment says cows, and cows I'm going to have—five hundred of 'em. Me and the sheriff agreed five hundred would just cover yore indebtedness."

Old Tom's face paled in anger.

"That's robbery!" he snapped. "The herd's worth three times the amount of the note. I'll leave it to Hunter or any cattleman."

"Yuh won't leave it to nobody. The number's already written on the attachment papers."

This sneering assurance was too much. Red was flooding McNamara's throat. In a moment anger would overpower him, impel him to overt, dangerous action. Perhaps Benson was counting on this, taunting him to drag iron as he had almost done two days before at the ranch. With McNamara gone there would be no one to contest the attachment.

Menn Toleson read all this in the quick flash of glances, and immediately he thrust himself forward.

"Wait a minute," he ordered. "Let's get all the cards on the table."

ELLERY came up to join McNamara, and the two groups faced each other, three on a side. All the men were still in the saddle.

"Keep your lip outa this, Toleson," snarled Harve.

Menn regarded the big man levelly, but he made no reply; instead, he turned toward the cattle buyer.

"Hunter, I want to ask yuh a question. Those cows belong to McNamara as yuh kin tell by the brand. Would yuh be willin' to buy 'em market price according to grade, if there was no attachment on them?"

"Certainly, if there was no attachment."

"So I thought. Now stir yore memory a little. I worked most of the summer with the construction gang building this new railroad. Mebbe yuh remember seein' me around town."

Hunter's eyes lighted.

"Now that yuh mention it, I do remember. Yuh was teaming. I thought yore face was familiar when yuh rode up."

Benson spat savagely into the dust. "What the hell's all this—"

Toleson's voice went on, disregarding him:

"And do yuh remember, Hunter, the little tangle about the location of the range and section line through here and how the railroad surveyors' measurements failed to hit with the old location?"

"Shore I remember. An', say, I jest got the final dope on that yesterday. The railroad company was right. There was an old mistake on the county records, a clerk had copied *east* when he should have copied *west* in recordin' the metes and bounds. The cornerstone fer this section of land is fifty feet west of that draw instead of fifty feet east of it, as we had figgered before."

Benson's head was poking forward from his shoulders like an irate rooster's.

"Gosh-a-mighty, what's all this got to do with them cattle?"

"Plenty," answered Menn. "Hunter's information simplifies things. That makes the range and section line about ten feet this side the cattle pens, don't it, Hunter?"

"Yes, jest about."

"And the range line and the county line are jest the same, ain't they?"

"They happen to be right along here."

Toleson now swung toward Benson and the officer.

"There yuh are, Mister Deputy Sheriff. I gambled that those railroad surveyors would be right, and I won my gamble. The county line is between us and that herd. We're standin' in Presidente County, but them cows are in Casimo County, and from the location of the cattle pens they'll be shipped from Casimo County. Yuh can't lay a hand on them. Yore authority goes no farther'n the county line.

"Take yore attachment papers and start a fire with them, but don't try to do no legal stealin' for Harve Benson. An attachment on them cows would have to be served by an officer of Casimo County, and, by the time yuh get one here, the cows'll be rollin' into Kansas City. Savvy the burro, officer?"

McNamara's jaw was sagging.

"I WANTA know why didn't yuh tell me this before we started, Toleson?"

"Because I wasn't shore. If we had got them sold before Benson showed up it would have made no difference. But, in case he did show up, I was gamblin' the pens would be in Casimo County and we could check him, that's all."

"Lord!" muttered McNamara, and wiped his face with his scarf.

As his eyes now settled on the slowly clouding countenance of Harve Benson, Menn realized that a supreme moment had come, a moment that he had expected, anticipated, long known to be inevitable, yet one which made him cold, weak-muscled, as it came to a climax.

It was the tense, charged hush before a thunderstorm, a brooding palpable menace that must culminate in a settlement between himself and Benson.

The rising wrath of frustration darkened the brows of the big rancher. It lay as a band of hate across his eyes, rolled downward to curl his animal lips. The exposure of one yellow-pointed tooth was the grimace of an angry wolf.

The tenseness of the moment caught the other men, silenced them with restrained expectancy. Harman's eyes rolled toward his chief, but he did not move his head. The deputy's weaker countenance sagged the jaw, pulling down the lips in a queer, inverted U, and his eyelids spread in definite alarm.

Menn knew that Harve would play for surprise, work to take an opponent off guard, seize the split second advantage that spelled success or disaster. He could read these emotions sweeping across Benson's face, see the glint of wariness that presaged action.

Harve swung suddenly toward the officer, simulating an anger he did not feel.

"Why didn't yuh know about this?"

The deputy started at these words, his slouched back stiffening as if he had been prodded with a gun.

"Gosh, I can't know 'bout every location change as soon as it takes place. We gotta be notified about 'em from the recorder's office."

"Recorder's office, hell! Now, I've been gyped, beaten out of my rights by that coyote of a Toleson, the sneakin', back-stabbin' skunk of a dirty polecat."

That his words had no application to his opponent seemed meaningless to Benson. Once started, the torrent of his wrath poured forth. His undisciplined temper gave volume to his words, stinging epithets that no man could take without rejoinder.

AT the first move of Harve, Menn felt his blood grow cold, his joints melt to ice-water. His palms grew clammy like patches of dead perspiration. He knew the feeling; he had felt it before, in a moment ahead of flashing gunplay. It was like the buck ague of a hunter, a paralysis he must conquer and surmount.

Out of this chill lethargy came reaction as his nerves snapped again to response. His shoulder throbbed and jerked as the cold of his anger turned to heat.

That single shoulder lurch was all that Benson needed. Now was his chance. His own gun hand was but inches from the holster, and Menn's was resting upon the saddle-horn.

"Toleson, yuh—yuh— Don't yuh pull no gun—"

The young rider lived hours in that next fifth of a second. Harve had made that stall, played that his opponent had started for leather first, bolstered a case of self-defense when he himself was the aggressor.

And Harve's Colt was half out of leather before Menn's hand left the saddle-horn.

All the bullying, ruthless tactics of Benson flashed before Menn's eyes. He saw for a moment his own dad, ruined, disappointed, hurried to his grave by this man before him.

He saw the brow-beating of McNamara, the dastardly scheming, the refusal to play fair under any circumstances, the cowardly, sure-fire-killer methods of Benson.

And he saw at the same time the grim danger of his own position.

Harve had picked him for a weak opponent, a safe target for his lead, yet had tried to confuse him, distract him, take an unfair advantage on the draw. It was man against man now, with death for the loser, and Benson was already ahead of him in the grab.

Yet he must fight it through. He must not fail.

He must hang on for at least one shot, one retaliation against the gun-bully type as represented by Benson. A definite, compelling thought possessed him—he must get his man. The rest of the world was blotted out; only Benson's form stood clear.

He must get Benson.

Menn did not know whether Harve had fired or not. He only knew that the gun kicked in his own hand, then kicked again like a reflex throb. Hot water was scalding his side. Then he saw Benson sag, slouch down in the saddle.

The big rancher tried to lift himself, raise the gun again, stunned surprise giving way to determination on his rough face. But his will was not enough; the effort was never completed.

Harve went down over the horn, slid, to fall limp at the horse's feet, his left hand still clutching the reins.

A profane word of surprise clicked spontaneously from Harman's lips, but he made no further move. It was the deputy who recovered first to bark out words at the young cowman.

"Hold it!" ordered the deputy. "I'm not out of my bailiwick now. This shootin' took place in Presidente County. I'm arrestin' yuh fer the murder—"

Tobe Hunter strode forward. "Hold on yoreself!" he snapped. "Yuh can't run a sandy like that. We saw what happened—plain self-defense. Benson went fer his gun first. Arrest Toleson and I'll testify in his defense, and so will these other boys. Yuh jest better take things a little slower."

The facts were too self-evident. The officer about-faced with alacrity.

"Guess yuh're right at that. Come on, Harman, let's pick up Harve."

Toleson slowly whirled his horse, sick as a reaction from that tense, nerve-trying moment. He alighted beside the cattle pens and squatted there, getting a new grip on his nerves.

He was still squatting in the shade when McNamara came for him.

"Hunter'll take the herd. My note'll be paid to Benson's estate dollar fer dollar. That sorta settles everythin', so we better be gettin' back to the ranch."

"Me? Yuh ain't got no permanent job there for a blacksmith."

Both men were avoiding mention of the shooting affray. It was a closed book.

"Blacksmith? Gosh, no. From now on yuh're ridin' fer the brand—if yuh'll take the job."

"Taken," replied Menn bruskly. "My legs never did fit no leather apron."

HARD-RIDING HARD-FIGHTING YARNS of the RANGELAND in Next Month's Issue of

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Six-Gun Welcome

He kept the lawman in front of him as a shield

When Jack Frost Entered the Golden Nugget Saloon, He Stepped Head-on into a Murder Accusation —and Hell Popped Loose!

By DONALD BAYNE HOBART

Author of "Renegade Rustlers," "The Whistling Waddy Rides On," etc.

JACK FROST glanced casually at the small wiry man who left the Double Nugget Saloon just as he entered. Then the new arrival slapped his weather-beaten grey Stetson against his cowhide chaps and sauntered up to the bar. A cloud of dust rose from the hat.

"Shore been havin' a dry spell 'round this part o' the country." He fixed his cold blue eyes on the stout barkeep. "I'll have two fingers o' whiskey an' a chaser."

"Comin' right up." The barkeep shoved a bottle and glass forward and turned to fill a tumbler with

water. "Yuh're durn right, it's dry country."

Frost glanced around the room, deserted save for a grey-haired man who sat at a table, his back toward the bar. He appeared to be deeply engrossed in the newspaper that was propped in front of him.

"It's all new tuh me—I'm a stranger 'round these parts," Frost offered.

"I'm Chesty Mullins," said the barkeeper. "Not that yuh asked or nothin', but folks kin kinda talk better when they know each other's names."

"Mine's Frost, Jack Frost." The stranger loosened the heavy Colt that hung in an open holster tied low on his left hip. He appeared to feel better when he discovered the .45 moved easily. "Kinda quiet 'round here, ain't it?"

"Un-huh," Mullins nodded. "It's early yit"—he glanced at a clock on a shelf—"only a little after four. Come evenin', lot o' the boys will be driftin' in."

THE big barkeep saw the figure of a man outside the swinging doors of the saloon, but his expression remained placid.

"Ever hear of a *hombre* named Jasper King?" asked Frost.

"Shore have," answered Mullins. "He owns the Z Bar spread, a little bit west o' here."

"I'm looking fer King." Frost held up the tumbler of water and looked at it thoughtfully. "I gotta see him 'bout somethin'. I—"

Abruptly he dropped the glass. He whirled, his hand streaking for his gun. He ducked as a knife flashed through the air, thrown by the man at the swingnig doors. Frost's gun roared, and a bullet thudded into the door close to where the man's head had been but an instant before.

From the boardwalk that ran along the side of the single street of the little cowtown, there came the sound of rapidly running feet. Frost started hastily toward the door and then paused.

"Don't reckon there's any use chasin' that jasper now," he said. "But it looks to me like I ain't exactly welcome 'round here." He walked over and picked up the knife. "Ol' Mexican knife, it looks like tuh me. Reckon I'll keep it fer a souvenir." He stuck the weapon in the pocket of his chaps opposite from his gun.

From out in the street came the sound of excited voices and the tramp of feet. A moment later a group of men burst into the saloon.

"What's been goin' on here?" demanded the leader, a grizzled individual who bore a striking resemblance to a turkey gobbler, and who wore a sheriff's star on his vest. "Who was shootin'?"

"Glad yuh got here, Sheriff," said Mullins in sudden excitement. "I been kinda nervous-like alone with this stranger. Specially after he shot Jasper King in th' back!"

"What yuh talkin' about?" Frost's eyes were colder than his name as he glared at the stout bartender.

"Jest—jest what I said," stammered Mullins. "There's King a-settin' over there in that chair—an' he's shore dead!"

There was an ominous rumble from the rapidly-growing crowd as the sheriff went to the grey-haired man seated at the table.

"How 'bout it, Parker?" demanded some one. "Is he dead?"

"Yep." Sheriff Parker scowled as he finished his examination. "It's King, all right, an' he's been shot in th' back just like Mullins said."

Frost's eyes narrowed as he stood near the bar, his hand hovering above his gun. He knew that he had been framed.

Jasper King had been dead when Frost had first entered the saloon. The newspaper had been propped up in front of him to make the rancher's position seem natural.

"I didn't kill him!" snapped Frost, as Sheriff Parker crossed the room toward him. "He was dead when I came in here."

"What 'bout that shot we heard?" demanded Parker.

"Some jasper threw a knife at me from the door an' I took a shot at

him." He frowned as he realized how thin his story sounded.

"He's lyin', Sheriff," exclaimed the barkeep. "Nobody threw no knife at him."

"Shet up, Mullins." The old sheriff was still watching Frost. "What's yore name?" he demanded.

"Jack Frost."

"He told me he was lookin' fer King," said Mullins quickly. "An' then when he seen th' old man sittin' at th' table, he downed him 'thout even givin' him a chancet tuh turn around!"

"There's a mighty hot place reserved fer liars like you," snarled Frost, his eyes fairly blazing.

"Let's see yore gun, Frost," ordered the sheriff.

"Jest a minute, Sheriff." Frost spoke quietly, but there was an ominous note in his voice. "I'm a stranger here in Beaver, an' I know that I've been framed. If yuh was tuh find yoreself in th' spot that I'm in, would yuh give up yore gun without a fight?"

"That's a question I can't answer," said Parker. "But th' evidence is all against yuh now, Frost." His voice grew harsh. "Give me yore gun!"

Frost hesitated. The old sheriff stood within a few feet of him, and Parker's own weapon was still in his holster. There was not the slightest sign of fear in the eyes of either man. For an instant the crowd waited tensely.

"All right." Frost drew his gun and held it out, butt first. "Here it is."

Parker stepped forward and grasped the gun that the stranger held extended in his right hand. But as the sheriff clutched the weapon, Frost failed to release his grip on the barrel. Instead, he pulled the lawman toward him. At the same time he wrenched the sheriff's Colt from its holster.

"Any o' you jaspers try to git me an' I'll shore let him have it." Frost swung the sheriff around as he spoke, holding him in front of himself as a shield, gun at the lawman's back. "We're leavin' right now."

There were curses from the crowd as Frost and his captive edged toward the door. There was not a man there who did not admire and respect old Bill Parker, and they refused to risk his life in an attempt to shoot the stranger.

Frost reached the door, then the street outside. He pushed the sheriff toward the far end of the hitching rail in front of the saloon where his horse was tied. Then, deliberately, he thrust out his foot, caught the sheriff's ankle. The lawman sprawled flat upon the boardwalk.

Before Parker could get to his feet, Frost had released his mount and flung himself into the saddle. Behind him guns roared and bullets whistled dangerously close as the crowd from the saloon poured out into the street.

Frost's big bay thudded toward the outskirts of the town. Once he found himself beyond Beaver, the waddy swerved his mount to the south. Behind him came a group of riders, but the bay was fast and Frost swiftly began to out-distance his pursuers.

HALF an hour later he had ridden into the foothills southwest of the little cowtown. He reined his mount and continued at a slower pace. There was no point in taxing the bay now; he might need all the endurance the horse possessed before morning.

Night descended and Frost felt more secure as he rode steadily onward. Finally he found himself in a narrow ravine at the foot of the mountains. There was no moon and the night was dark. He wandered along the ravine until finally he came to a small stream. Here he watered his horse and then drank. The water was clear and cool and he filled his canteen.

For two hours he waited and listened, but there was no sound of pursuit. Evidently the posse had lost his trail, but he did not doubt they would be able to pick it up again with the coming of the dawn.

He unsaddled and hobbled the bay, then ate a meager meal from the

supplies he carried in his blanket roll. He camped there for the night, sleeping fitfully and awaking at intervals to listen for some sign of danger. Just as the cold grey light of dawn appeared in the sky, he rose and saddled his horse.

As he started to swing into the saddle, he paused suddenly. He had heard a slight sound behind him—the metallic click of a gun hammer. His hand streaked for his gun, and then paused, the weapon half drawn, as he heard a chill voice.

"Hold it, feller!" snapped the man behind him. "Or I'll riddle yuh!"

Slowly Frost swung around, his lips drawn into a thin line. Behind a boulder a man was covering him with a rifle.

"Looks like yuh got me," said the waddy slowly.

"There ain't no doubt 'bout that." His captor's tone was grim. "Take yore gun out an' drop it to th' ground easy-like."

FOR an instant Frost hesitated, his eyes narrowed. He considered trying to get the other man, but he realized his captor would be able to fire the rifle before he could aim his six-gun. With a shrug he dropped his heavy Colt to the ground.

"That's better," said the man behind the rock. "I was fraid yuh might be kinda unreasonable."

"How'd yuh happen to find me?" demanded Frost.

"Been trailin' yuh," answered the other man. "Figgered yuh might head thisaway. I didn't run acrost yore hoss' tracks until jest a little while ago, though."

"Yuh one o' Sheriff Parker's posse?"

"Nope. Least-wise, I wasn't ridin' with them. I'm Dawson, foreman o' th' Z Bar spread."

"Jasper King's foreman?" asked Frost.

"Right! An' yuh murdered th' old man!"

"I was framed!"

"That's what yuh say!" Dawson laughed nastily. "But I'm figgerin' yuh're gonna be wearin' a hemp necktie when I git yuh back tuh Beaver."

He stepped out from behind the boulder and Frost saw that he was a big man with a heavy face. He wore a .45 in an open holster tied low on his right leg. Frost decided that the foreman of the Z Bar was a dangerous *hombre*.

"Yuh jest might have another gun hidden away somewhere." Dawson placed the rifle against the rock and advanced his hand on the butt of the holstered Colt. "I reckon I'd better look yuh over." He stepped closer and patted Frost's grey flannel shirt with his left hand, his right still on his gun.

Frost lowered his head. Abruptly he lunged forward, butting the other man on the chin. Dawson cursed as he reeled back. He had his gun half drawn as Frost's right fist caught him a heavy blow on the side of his face.

The gun roared and a bullet tore a hole in the ground between Frost's feet. But he had grabbed the foreman's gun arm and was twisting it ruthlessly.

There was the thud of bone against bone as Dawson sent his left fist smashing into Frost's face. Frost shook his head groggily, for the blow had been a powerful one, but he clung tightly to the other man's gun arm.

The foreman snarled, smashed again his heavy fist into Frost's face, and then gave a mighty jerk and got his arm free. Frost ducked as Dawson swung the heavy Colt, but he was not quick enough. The barrel caught him a glancing blow on the head—and then everything went black as he pitched to the hard ground.

He regained his senses a few moments later to find his hands bound tightly behind him. The foreman of the Z Bar was standing over him, regarding him thoughtfully.

"Right tough, ain't yuh?" Dawson said.

"Wish I had jest one more chanct tuh take a sock at yuh," remarked Frost bitterly.

"But yuh won't git it," Dawson laughed. "An' yuh won't run away while I git my hoss neither."

Frost watched him as he turned and walked toward the entrance of the ravine. The sun was bright now and it beat down on the helpless waddy's face. He waited until Dawson disappeared from view, then rolled over on his back. He kicked his legs in the air and finally the Mexican knife dropped out of the pocket of his chaps.

His feet were not bound and with some little effort he managed to hold the blade between his boots as he knelt on the ground. He swiftly sawed the rope that bound his wrists, and cut the strands.

He leaped to his feet, his hands free, just as he heard Dawson's horse clattering over the hard ground. A soft exclamation of delight escaped his lips as he saw that the foreman had left the rifle still leaning against the boulder.

Frost grabbed up the Winchester, stepped behind the rock and crouched down out of sight just as Dawson rode into view.

He heard the foreman curse as he rode closer and discovered that his prisoner was gone.

"Run away, did he!" growled Dawson. "Well, he won't git far."

"Stick 'em up, Dawson!" Frost appeared above the rock as he spoke, the rifle aimed at the other man's heart.

Dawson whirled in the saddle, glaring at him, but his hands went up.

"You're smarter than I thought," he said slowly. "Now yuh got me, what yuh gonna do 'bout it?"

"Throw yore gun on th' ground jest like yuh made me do," said Frost.

Dawson hesitated, then he glanced at something behind and above the man who had the drop on him. The foreman's heavy face broke into a broad grin.

Frost frowned, but he did not glance behind him. He wondered if Dawson really thought he could fool him by such an old trick.

"Looks tuh me like yuh're kinda in the same fix as th' feller what had th' bear by th' tail an' couldn't let go," said Dawson mockingly—and then his tone grew sharp. "Careful, Chesty, we need this jasper alive!"

Wham! A bullet hit the rock not far from Frost's head. He swung around to find Chesty Mullins covering him from a ledge above on the wall of the ravine.

"Drop that rifle!" Mullins sent a second bullet plowing into the ground close to Frost's right leg. "Th' next time I ain't gonna miss."

Frost put the rifle down. He had decided that the stout barkeeper's shots were coming far too close for comfort. And the foreman's grin had been fully justified.

FROM the mouth of the ravine there came the clatter of hoofs. A moment later the posse appeared, with Sheriff Parker in the lead.

"We got him, Sheriff!" shouted Mullins as he started to climb down. "An' he tried tuh kill both me an' Dawson."

"That's right," said the Z Bar foreman as the men swung from their saddles and grabbed Frost roughly. "He's shore mean, Sheriff!"

Frost felt that it was useless to protest. There was no doubt in his mind now that Dawson had been the one who had thrown the knife at him back in the little cowtown. He stood quietly, his lean face hard, as the posse tied his hands and then led his horse toward him.

"String 'im up," shouted one of the men. "He killed Old Man King—an' he deserves to be hung!"

"Kin I ask one favor, Sheriff?" Frost demanded, his eyes fixed on the old lawman who had dismounted and was standing close to him.

"Depends on what it is," said Parker slowly.

"I want yuh to search me right now!" Frost spoke insistently.

"No harm in that." The sheriff moved closer and started to go through his prisoner's pockets. "But I don't see how it's gonna do yuh any good." Then he uttered a low

whistle as he drew out a badge—and an official-looking paper.

"Why, this says yuh're a Cattlemen's Association Detective," he exclaimed as he read the paper. "An' this is shore a Association badge."

"He must have stole 'em somewheres," said Dawson quickly.

"That's right," rumbled Mullins. "He ain't no more detective than I am."

"King say anythin' to yuh 'bout losin' stock?" Frost asked the sheriff.

"He did," Parker nodded. "Told me he was right certain that someone was rustlin' his beef from time tuh time."

"He suspect anyone?" demanded Frost.

"No." The old sheriff shook his head. "Said he was goin' to tell me 'bout it when he did."

"Aw, what's the use of all this talk?" demanded Dawson. "We all know that this feller killed King!"

"I jest remembered somethin'," exclaimed Mullins excitedly. "Yest'day there was a feller in the saloon jest 'fore this *hombre* comes in. Small man, he was, an' wearin' a black Stetson.

"What does that prove?" Sheriff Parker glared at the barkeeper.

"Well, this other feller leaves jest as Frost comes in. The jasper in the black hat has been talkin' tuh old man King. He drops somethin' as he goes out—an' Frost picks it up. I'm bettin' that feller was the Association man an' Frost found his badge an' that paper."

There was a murmur from the other members of the posse. They felt that Mullins might be telling the truth. It was possible. Frost was a stranger, and they had not forgotten how he had threatened to kill the sheriff if they did not let him leave the saloon in Beaver.

They had been on Frost's trail all night and they were tired and impatient and hard to handle. Parker realized this and the old lawman decided they had better get moving.

"Fork yore kak," he snapped to Frost. "We're takin' yuh back to jail."

Some of the others protested as Frost swung awkwardly into the saddle, his bound hands making movement difficult. It was Dawson and Mullins who continued to insist that Frost stretch hemp.

"I'm still th' law," growled Parker, "an' I'll handle this my own way. Come on, git goin'!"

In sullen silence they rode out of the ravine. The sheriff stayed close to Frost, while one of the posse led the prisoner's horse.

It was noon when they again reached Beaver. The citizens of the little town were out in full force as the cavalcade rode down the dusty street. Frost searched the faces about him, hoping for a sight of the man in the black Stetson who had left the saloon the previous afternoon just as he had entered.

TO his disappointment, he did not discover his quarry. Too soon he was in the little jail, his hands unbound, the cell door locked behind him.

Frost dropped down on the iron bench that was the only bit of furnishing in the cubicle. He remained there alone, thinking, all of the long afternoon. Finally it grew dark and Parker appeared, carrying an oil lantern. There was a deputy with him who bore coffee and hamburgers.

"The crowd is gettin' right nasty," remarked the sheriff ominously. "Lot o' them been drinkin' all afternoon over to th' Double Nugget an' they are shore anxious tuh string yuh up."

"Mullins an' Dawson framed me," said Frost. "Reckon old man King must 'a' found out that his foreman was doin' th' rustlin' an' they figgered they better git rid o' him 'fore he had time tuh tell yuh 'bout it. Looks like they spotted me as the *hombre* King sent fer."

"I'd like tuh believe yuh," said Parker. "But yuh fired that shot in the saloon, an' King was dead from a bullet in his back. There ain't no way o' gittin' out o' that, Frost."

"Mebbe if we could find that feller with th' black Stetson, he might be able to tell us somethin'," remarked

Frost. "He was in the saloon 'fore I was, yesterday."

"Uh-huh," said Parker doubtfully.

"My name is on that paper identifying me as a Cattlemen's Association detective," said Frost insistently. "All I ask is that yuh telegraph th' Association an' see if I don't answer to their description o' Jack Frost."

"Huh," said Parker thoughtfully. "That's an idea. I'll do it."

"Yore coffee's gittin' cold," remarked the deputy with a yawn.

Frost drank his coffee and ate his hamburger sandwiches. Parker and the deputy, placing the lighted lantern on the floor, had left him, carefully relocking the door. The tall lean figure of the range detective cast weird shadows on the walls of the cell as he finished eating and began to move about. He went to the small barred window and peered out. All he could see was the side and roof of a one-story frame building looming about fifteen feet away from the jail.

He glanced at the oil lantern and then at the worn blanket that was spread over the iron bench. As he did so, an idea struck him. Swiftly he tore a two-foot square from the edge of the blanket. He set it on fire from the lantern and then dropped it out of the window of the cell.

The deputy appeared a moment later. He unlocked the door, but remained in the corridor.

"Gimme them dishes," he said, watching the prisoner distrustfully, his hand close to his gun.

"Right." Frost slowly gathered up the coffee cup and the plate. "What's that?" he asked suddenly, glancing over his shoulder toward the window.

The flames had spread from the spot were the blanket had dropped. They were now licking at the wooden building close by.

"Sam Fenton's store is on fire!" exclaimed the deputy. He rushed into the cell, the prisoner forgotten for the moment.

That was a mistake upon the part of the deputy. Abruptly Frost's fist smacked against this chin and sent him reeling back against the wall.

The man cursed, fingers clawing for his gun, but he was not quick enough. Frost landed on him like a ton of bricks. The two squirmed about on the hard floor, struggling grimly and silently.

Neither of them saw the heavy face of Tom Dawson as the Z Bar foreman appeared in the corridor. He watched them for an instant, making no attempt to come to the aid of either man, and then ducked out of sight.

Frost's fist shot out, again caught the deputy on the chin. The man's head thumped against the floor and he went limp. Frost snatched the gun from the unconscious man's holster, and, weapon in hand, leaped to the open door of the cell.

Cautiously he peered along the corridor. There was no one in sight. Quietly he locked the door of the cell and then moved toward the sheriff's office. He found it empty, the outer door standing open.

Then as he reached the door, he heard the sound of excited voices further along the street. It was evident that the citizens of Beaver were fighting the fire that had started on the side of Fenton's store.

Frost slipped out into the street. He started toward the hitching-rail in front of the saloon further up the street, then paused, startled, as he heard a muffled shot coming from the inside of the jail.

HE swung around just in time to see a figure looming in the doorway. A gun roared in the hand of the man who had just appeared. Frost found himself whirled halfway around as a bullet caught him in the left shoulder.

The heavy Colt in his own right hand barked viciously. The man in front of the jail cursed loudly, then thudded to the ground, face downward.

Frost ducked into the shadows between two buildings as men rushed to the scene, attracted by the sound of the shooting. Evidently they had found little difficulty in conquering

the blaze at the side of Fenton's store. There was a shout and then the angry rumble of voices as they discovered the prisoner's escape from the jail. They would search the town from one end to the other. He had to move fast.

Frost was sure that the man who had fired at him had been Dawson, but he had no idea whether he had killed the Bar Z foreman or merely wounded him. He edged back between the buildings. His whole left side was one searing pain from his wounded shoulder, and his shirt was wet with blood, but he went on grimly.

He managed somehow to make his way to the rear of the saloon. A lighted window caught his gaze, he staggered toward it, peered in.

The stout barkeeper, Mullins, was standing gazing at a small, dark-haired man who was tied to a chair. The lower sash of the window was raised a few inches, and Frost could hear their words clearly.

"So yuh didn't see nothin'," the barkeeper snarled at his prisoner. "Yuh jest come in an' got a drink—an' didn't even notice th' old man sittin' at th' table, eh, Jones?"

"I told yuh all that before," protested Jones. "There ain't no sense in yuh keepin' me tied up like this!"

"That's what yuh think!" Mullins laughed nastily. "But me an' Dawson has it figgered out different. That's why we caught yuh on th' trail las' night an' brung yuh here. Yuh ain't gonna tell no one that ole man King was sittin' there dead 'fore Frost ever come near th' saloon."

Frost was no longer listening. He had crept around until he found the door that opened into the little room at the back of the saloon.

He tried it, found it unlocked. The wound in his shoulder had grown so bad that he could not use his left arm; it dangled helplessly by his side. He dropped his gun into his holster—and then opened the door the slightest crack with his right hand. Then, with his hand again on the butt of the heavy Colt, he kicked the door all the way open.

Mullins whirled. His startled gasp sounded like the air going out of a tire as he saw the grim, blood-stained figure looming in the doorway.

"Don't talk, Mullins," Frost said in a whisper. His gun was menacing the barkeeper. "Or I'll shore finish yuh right now."

"I never was so glad in all my life tuh see a feller I don't know," Jones said relievedly.

"Untie him," Frost snapped at Mullins, with a nod toward the prisoner.

The barkeep hesitated. Frost stepped forward and jabbed the barrel of the gun into Mullins' stomach.

"Yuh heard me!"

HASTILY Mullins released the bound man. Jones moved his cramped limbs slowly, but he finally managed to get to his feet.

"Yuh got me now," said Mullins. "But they'll shore lynch yuh when they find yuh killed that deputy!"

"Huh?" Frost glared at him.

"Never mind!" The barkeeper, evidently realizing he had said too much, lapsed into a sullen silence.

"Yuh're gonna talk!" Frost snapped. "An' right quick!" He glanced at Jones. "Listen, *hombre*, I'm takin' a long chanct—but yuh keep this jasper covered while I kinda make him see th' light, as th' feller says."

Frost handed his gun to Jones, who swiftly backed around so that he stood in front of the closed door that separated the little back room from the rest of the saloon.

"There's a hallway between this room an' th' bar," Jones said softly. "Even if yuh yell right loud, there ain't much chanct o' bein' heard." He smiled grimly. "I tried it."

"That's all I want tuh know!"

Frost advanced toward Mullins, his face hard. The barkeep began to back away, frightened by the look in his captor's eyes. Suddenly Frost's fist shot out, caught Mullins in the eye. The fat man whimpered. Chesty Mullins was brave enough when he had a gun in his hand—but the very thought of physical

pain left him in a state of abject terror.

Frost had forced him against the wall. The detective was pounding at him unmercifully, while Mullins futilely tried to fight back. The barkeep's face was beginning to look like a piece of raw beefsteak.

"I'll talk—I'll talk!" he finally sobbed. "I'll do anythin' yuh say, ony stop hittin' me—stop!"

"You an' Dawson shot old man King back here where no one could hear th' gun an' then set him up in the bar!" Frost's fist smacked against Mullins' cheek. "Didn't yuh?"

"Yeah, yeah!" wailed Mullins. "We done it. It was Dawson's idea."

"Yuh ain't really hurt." Frost staggered, and for an instant everything grew black. Somehow he managed to regain his senses. "Yuh're jest yeller."

"He'll never talk to the sheriff like he did jest now," said Jones slowly. "He'll blubber—"

"Reckon it won't be necessary," said a quiet voice from the outer door. The old sheriff stood there. "I heard him."

Frost tensed. He listened for the expected uproar, but the little cowtown was very quiet.

"Figgered they'd be comin' tuh string me up 'bout now," he said slowly.

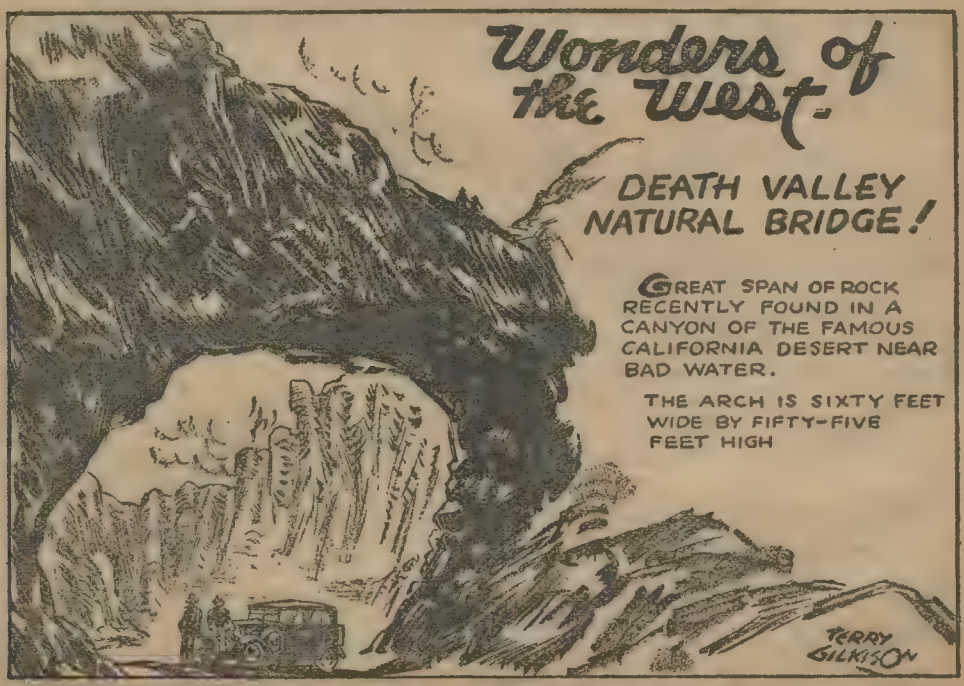
"NO danger o' that," Parker said. "The boys sort o' changed their minds. Dawson talked 'fore he cashed in his chips. Admitted everythin'—even tuh killin' th' deputy so yuh'd be blamed. Yuh're free, Frost."

"Thanks, Sheriff." Frost found himself terribly weak from loss of blood. "Shore is a peaceful town!" He staggered and would have fallen if Jones hadn't caught him.

"But no place fer a wanderin' cowpoke," Jones grinned. "Not fer this one, anyway."

Sheriff Parker apparently did not even hear him. He was gazing at the white, drawn face of Jack Frost.

"Right salty jasper," Parker said admiringly. He scowled at the barkeeper. "It would 'a' been jest too bad fer you if he had used both hands!"



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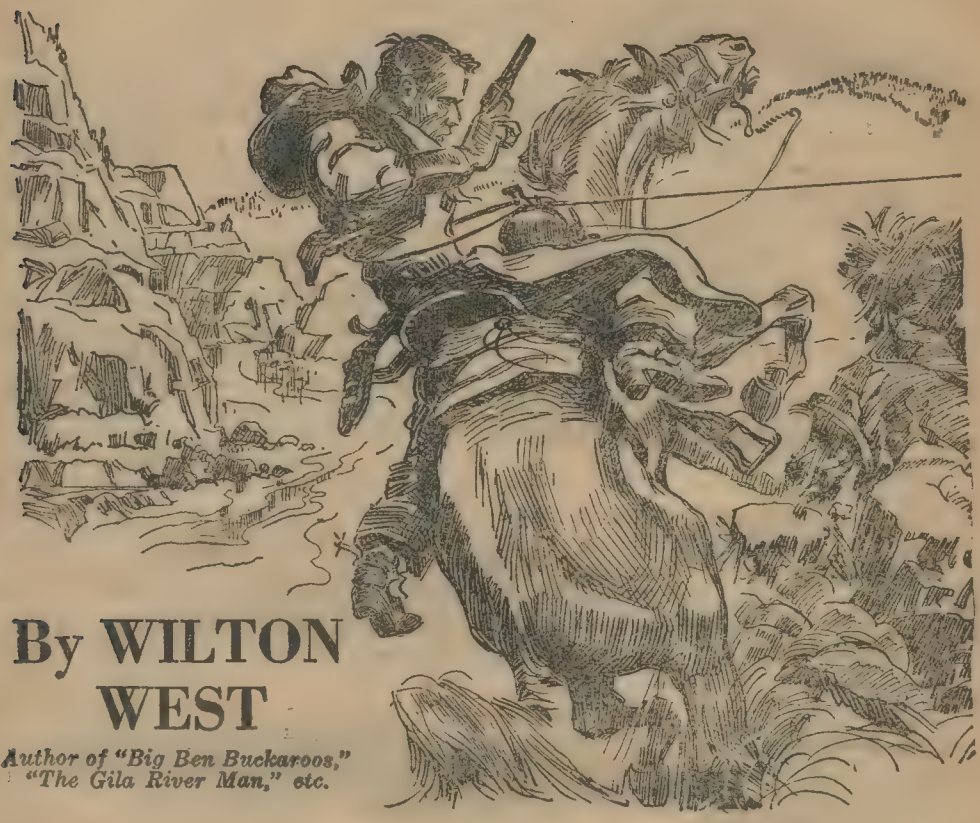


By WILTON WEST

Author of "Big Ben Buckaroos," "The Gila River Man," etc.

CHAPTER I

A Triangle of Snakes

RIPPING the silence of the rugged canyon wide open, echoing shots rattled. At the top of the steep trail, among massive boulders, the Navajo Kid laughed loudly, scornfully, with every blast of his two six-guns.

His wide-brimmed grey Stetson held two new holes through its crown. In the sunset's glow, his blond hair looked almost white against the bronze on his face and exposed throat.

Down below, at the foot of the canyon where it opened out into the desert, a dozen scowling outlaws cursed at him and jammed death-dealing slugs from their guns, trying to see him drop and stay dropped. Now and then he stepped tauntingly into view as he fired, and men fell.

"Three—an' I'll git more!" he muttered half aloud as, behind the boulders, he swiftly reloaded with expert fingers. Then he stepped forth once more and sent a terrific deluge of shots down at the huddled mass of white renegades below. An-

The Flying C Hires the Navajo Kid to

GUN TRAIL

A Complete Action Novelette

The lariat hissed forward and settled around Navajo's middle

other outlaw sank down, lifeless, and another staggered to his horse, crawled into the saddle and went racing away, swaying like a drunken man.

The rest, realizing their disadvantage in being in the open, broke into a desperate run for their horses, flung into their saddles and went tearing away toward the Mexican border, only a few miles beyond. The New Mexican sunset was just starting to turn into the purple of evening.

Navajo sent a mocking laugh after them, then coolly reloaded his six-guns. His steel-grey eyes watched the fleeing outlaws contemptuously as his voice taunted.

"Adios, hombres!" he yelled after them. "Keep ridin' an' yuh'll live longer." Then he looked around at the other boulder. "Reckon yore broncs is safe now, old-timer. Come on out."

As he rolled a cigarette, a big weatherbeaten, be-chapped cattleman with white hair and mustache stepped forth, still holding a Winchester. One side of his face was smeared with blood from a scalp wound. He looked down at the dead

Smoke Out a Gang of Border Hellions!

outlaws below, then into the Navajo Kid's strong, clean-shaven face.

"Stranger," he said hoarsely, "yuh have shore licked 'em, an' saved me an' them hosses. I'm thankin' yuh a heap. Them skunks most had me out. Jumped me like all hell-an'-gone. Ef ever I kin do yuh a favor, jest ask me—John Hicks, owner o' th' Flyin' C."

Once more the Navajo Kid's laugh rang out, but this time his keen eyes lost their grimness of a moment before.

"I was ridin' for yore spread when I seen them skunks a-shootin' at yuh, an' reckon I'll be askin' that favor right *pronto*, me bein' out of a job an' short on *dinero*."

HE glanced down again at the foot of the canyon. Hick's horse herd of some fifty pintoes, bays, sorrels, blacks and greys were now standing quietly, some with lowered heads as they grazed at the scant bunches of grass there. His timely arrival had saved old Hicks from seeing the animals driven away by the outlaws and lost forever. And had probably saved his life.

"Son," old Hicks replied, wiping his blood-smeared face with his neckerchief, studying the Navajo Kid keenly, "I ain't rememberin' seein' yuh in these parts before. Who air yuh, lad?"

Navajo grinned, lit his smoke, stepped forward and helped Hicks tie the bandage about his scalp wound, using his own neckerchief and Hicks'.

"Why, folks calls me th' Navajo Kid," he said. He felt of the old man's scalp gingerly. "Got yuh sorta bad, boss. Another hair's-breadth an' it'd 'a' been wooden clothes for *you*."

Hicks gazed at the Navajo Kid from wide eyes. "You—th' Navajo Kid?" he exclaimed, admiration leaping into his voice. "Th' young fella what caught them stage robbers over Naco-way little while ago, an' what busted up th' Booth gang down in th' Big Bend a year or so back? An' what's jest been down in Mexico in th' revolution, achasin' them durned Yaquis through them hell-flung mountains o' Chihuahua?" His strong, gnarled hand reached out, gripped the Navajo Kid's. "Son, I'm powerful glad tuh meet up with yuh. An' I'm repeatin' my offer, son. Any time yuh wants a ridin' job—"

"Then I'm hired right this minute," Navajo laughed. "I was ridin' down here tuh ask that. Folks told me that yuh're hirin' more riders for yore comin' roundup, an' so I comes a'rompin' along. But we'd better git them broncs o' yore'n started back to yore ranch. Them gun-slingin' *hombres* may come back. Who were they, anyway, Hicks?"

As they started the horse-herd back up through the rugged canyon, old Hicks answered.

"Them's th' Red Dalton gang, Navajo—dirtiest bunch what ever rode the Border. A month ago, us ranchers had a run-in with 'em and we killed three. They hole up down below th' Line, 'round a Mex town called Agua Mucho. In that fight, I killed off Dalton's brother—a low-down knife-tosser. Since then, Dalton's been a-swearin' he's gonna git me an' clean out my Flyin' C from hoofs tuh rafters.

"Two o' my cowboys was shot down couple weeks ago, ridin' range, an' both had notices left on 'em tellin' me tuh git out or git planted." The old cattleman's eyes hardened and his mouth jerked as he added, "But I'm shore stickin', Navajo, come hell or high water. No Hicks ever turned tail tuh a bunch o' renegades, no time!"

"How'd they come tuh jump yuh this time?" Navajo asked as they rode out of the canyon and started across the desert, over which the sunset was rapidly turning into early evening.

"My riders is all out gatherin' a shippin' herd," old Hicks explained. "They sent me word they needed more hosses, so I come out an' gathered up this yere bunch an' war headin' home. Then they jumps me fast, like yuh seen. I wanta warn yuh—keep yore eyes wide open, son,

an' plenty slugs in yore guns. Those jaspers got friends down yere what would do anything Red Dalton asks. They'd ambush a fella fer a *peso*."

The Navajo Kid's eyes twinkled. Scars on his splendid young body, had Hicks seen them, would have told him that this twenty-five-year-old rider beside him had passed through many a gun-fight and had come out ready for more. Born on a cow ranch in Arizona, he had served in the Arizona Rangers, then in the Texas Rangers and down in the Mexican revolution, delighting in wild adventure.

As they drove the horse-herd across the desert, both men forced the horses into a faster gait.

An hour later, they were at old Hicks' Flying C.

Navajo studied the ranch keenly, approvingly. "Top-hand outfit," was his mental decision.

The two drove the herd into one of the corrals, tossed in some hay and filled the watering troughs, then went into the big ranchhouse. The cowboys Hicks had sent out to round up his shipping herd had not yet returned. A few straggling bunches of cattle, however, were arriving without herders, and drifting to the water tanks, bellowing softly.

"Reckon yore cook's got any grub handy, boss?" Navajo grinned. "I ain't eat since early this mornin'. Been poundin' leather a heap o' hot miles since then."

"Shore, shore, Navajo!" old Hicks apologized. "I plumb fergot." He headed for the kitchen. "Come on, an' Wild Bill'll git yuh plenty, *pronto*."

They found a strong, young Chinaman cleaning pots and pans. Hicks ordered food. Evening had come, with a rising moon.

"We call 'im Wild Bill, Navajo," he explained as the Chinaman went about getting the late meal, "'cause he hides out somewheres 'round yere ev'ry time he hears a gun crack. But he's th' best cook in this Antelope Valley, bar none."

"About them friends yuh say Red Dalton has here in yore valley," Navajo asked as they waited. "Who are they?"

"Two *hombres* what calls themselves Luke Brant, owner o' th' Diamond O over west o' yere, an' Neff Taylor, who owns th' Lazy F, south o' yere ten mile, by the Border. I owns all th' range north of 'em. They're nuthin' but durned squatters, though. Neither run 'nough cattle tuh keep more'n two or three riders busy. 'Less I'm plumb mistaken an' all signs fail, they're standin' in with Red Dalton an' his gang, but we cain't git no evidence ag'in 'em, as yit."

"A triangle o' snakes, eh, Boss?"

"Yuh've shore said it, Navajo, but—"

Suddenly he stopped, staring at a lurid light that was starting to appear outside the windows. With a bound, he was at the front door and outside, the Navajo Kid at his heels; and both stopped in their tracks, then leaped into the shadows of the wide porch. The haystacks were beginning to blaze, and several shots ripped out from brush beyond and thudded into the ranchhouse wall.

CHAPTER II

Equipped for Battle

NOW Hicks and Navajo were lying flat on the porch floor. Red flashes cut the night's darkness. Yells of defiance came from the outlaws.

Slipping from the end of the porch, Hicks and Navajo dropped behind the old wagon-body which was piled with chopped wood, near the kitchen. A bullet seared along Navajo's left arm. But then he was down flat again, gripping his guns. The wagon-body and its wood formed complete protection for him and old Hicks, though bullets were crashing into the wood.

As the flashes appeared, both men started driving shots at the places, from around the sides of the wagon-

body. The haystacks suddenly became a mass of furious flames, lighting the open space beyond the wagon-body brilliantly; and more shots came from the hidden outlaws. Then yells. But not a form appeared.

"No use shootin' at nothin', Boss," Navajo whispered. "If we keep quiet, mebbe they'll show up, thinkin' they got us."

A long minute passed, during which the outlaws did no more firing. Then a heavy voice in the bushes called:

"Reckon we got 'em both, fellas," it said. "Come on!"

"Red Dalton hisself" old Hicks whispered hoarsely against the Navajo Kid's ear. His guns rose, ready to blaze.

But, as some of the outlaws came warily forward from the bushes, it was not Hicks' fire that turned the tables. Instead, a rifle suddenly began roaring a hail of shots from the kitchen window. One outlaw pitched forward, with a scream of pain, and lay asprawl, just at the edge of the brush fifty yards away; and another cursed and went staggering out of sight, one leg dragging.

The Navajo Kid and Hicks whirled and stared at the window. Wild Bill's face appeared for a flashing instant; more shots roared from his Winchester, and the outlaws went scuttling back into the brush at headlong speed.

Navajo, followed by Hicks, made a dash for the nearest thicket, reached it, crawled through on hands and knees and got to the farther side. The moon was rising, round and full, and, in its light, they saw the outlaws racing away on their horses.

Navajo's wonderment was but a brief instant of uncertainty, for almost at once he heard rapid hoofbeats coming from the foothills just to the south, and, a moment more, old Hicks' cowboys came dashing forward, guns out and their eyes wide with surprise and anger as they saw the flames. The newcomers flung from their saddles and grouped swiftly about Hicks, shouting questions. From the porch, Wild Bill, gripping a rifle, stood watching.

Hicks quickly told his riders what had happened over in the canyon and how the Dalton gang had just attacked the ranch itself.

"They musta circled th' Navajo Kid an' me while we war drivin' our broncs yere from th' canyon, boys," he ended. "But let's git fightin' this yere fire. Wind's gittin' stronger an' ef th' ranchhouse gits on fire we're done for." He motioned toward the Navajo Kid. "Meet up with th' Navajo Kid, boys," he added. "He come along just as them skunks war rustlin' our hosses an' most had me down with a slug alongside my haid. Yuh've all heerd o' 'im, I know, an' he's on our payroll right from this minute."

THE cowboys gripped Navajo's hand cordially. They had heard stories of his bravery, of his nerve as a Ranger.

"Shore glad tuh have yuh with us, Navajo!" one said, "An' yore savin' th' boss stacks high with us."

"Yore welcome goes double, fellas," Navajo laughed, "but let's git after this fire, quick."

It took fully half an hour's desperate work to extinguish the flames, managing to confine the fire to the haystacks, however. Then Hicks led them into the mess shack. Wild Bill, grinning widely, served an enormous meal. Hicks slapped the Chinaman on his back and grinned around at his men.

"Wild Bill's shootin' that old rifle shore did th' business, boys," he told them. "Except fer him, Navajo an' me'd most likely be lyin' outside an' starin' up at th' stars."

Wild Bill's expression became a full-grown explosion of delight at the words. Man after man, who had heretofore treated him with amused contempt, now banged him on the shoulder as he went by with more dishes. But he seemed to be watching to catch the Navajo Kid's eye, and finally, as the men passed out-

side, he moved beside Navajo and spoke whisperingly.

"You come klitchen," he said, then passed on with his armful of dishes and vanished into the kitchen behind.

Walking out front with the other men, Navajo rolled a smoke and, as he saw them all settle down in a group, discussing the outlaws' attacks, he slipped into shadow, walked back to the kitchen and found Wild Bill at the sink. The Chinaman grinned and stopped his washing. In spite of his broken English, Navajo could understand him as he rapidly talked in his pidgin-English. And what Wild Bill told him brought stern lines into Navajo's face and saw his grey eyes narrow. He listened as the young Chinaman talked on, studying Wild Bill's yellow face keenly.

Piecing the Chinaman's story together, Navajo, as Wild Bill finished, patted him on the shoulder.

"So that's how come, eh?" he said. "Yuh worked three months on Luke Brant's Diamond O an' then two months on Neff Taylor's Lazy Y, an' saw Dalton an' his men welcome at both places, eh? An' heard 'em plan tuh clean our boss an' his Flyin' C plumb off'n th' map!"

Wild Bill's slant eyes glittered.

"They got um hangout in Hatchet Mountains—the Hole. I take 'um glub an' know way in."

"Why ain't yuh never told th' boss?" Navajo demanded.

"Blant an' Taylor an' Dalton bad mans, boss. Kill me all same coyote, if ketch me. They sen' me here to sen' 'em tips 'bout the Flyin' C, so can steal cattle an' hosses. All light, I come, two months ago. But pletty soon after I come, Mister Hicks he save my life from bull. Boss, he ver' brave man. So I don' sen' no word to them fella 'bout Flyin' C. But I 'flaid tell boss 'bout 'em."

The Navajo Kid smiled and slapped Wild Bill on the shoulder. "I savvy, Bill," he said softly. "As yuh knows where their hangout is, how 'bout you an' me goin' over there tonight?"

Wild Bill drew himself up. "I ready in ten minutes," he said.

Five minutes more and Navajo had Hicks closeted in the little ranch office. But Hicks scowled as he listened.

"Yuh're headin' intuh a rattler's nest, Navajo," he protested. "Better let us all go with yuh."

It took hard work to bring the old ranchman around, but finally Navajo won.

"Bill an' me's follerin' a short cut he says he knows, boss," Navajo finally stated. "You an' th' boys start for that Murky River he's told me about, then head up it intuh them hills an' keep follerin' it till yuh meets us."

Fearing further protests, Navajo slapped his Stetson on and hastened outside. Ten minutes later, from behind the corrals, he and Wild Bill loped away for the rugged Hatchet Mountains.

After a hour, he and Wild Bill went inside the mountains and riding a narrow trail which led up the steep side of a canyon wall. Navajo smiled as, riding behind Wild Bill, he noted the Chinaman's warlike equipment.

Two heavy six-guns swung at Wild Bill's hips; a Winchester reposed under his left leg; and a huge carving knife was tied to his gunbelt.

CHAPTER III

The Edge of the Rim

MEANWHILE, back at the Flying C, Hicks assembled his riders and told them of the plan.

"We're follerin' th' Navajo Kid, boys," he told them, "come sun-up. We're headin' for th' Murky, then trailin' up it through them durned hell's-own hills, but we're follerin' a new trail this time, fellas—a trail marked with pinto beans. Wild Bill told me he'd drop 'em on his way, sayin' it war a short-cut. Git fresh broncs now

and saddle up, an' grab yoreselves some grub while we waits fer dawn."

But the old ranchman could not wait that long. Just before dawn arrived, he was riding southeastward with his men. Hicks' new way cut straight across the hills. Soon he and his men saw the pinto beans, scattered here and there, and Hicks' grey eyes gleamed as he increased the gait.

At that same hour, over on Neff Taylor's Lazy T, Luke Brant and a few of his riders were grouped about Taylor. They had just arrived. Brant was plainly angry and nervous. He eyed Taylor grimly.

"Ever hear tell o' th' Navajo Kid, Neff?" he growled.

The two men eyed each other grimly.

"Reckon we both have, Luke," Taylor replied gruffly. "That Big Bend fight, when he got us and Dalton on th' run— But what's he got tuh do with—"

"Plenty, Neff," Brant told him. "He's here, in this valley, playin' he's workin' fer old Hicks up on th' Flyin' C, but I'm bettin' he's wearin' a Texas Ranger's star under his shirt."

"An' ef so, he's got a hell's-slew o' other Rangers stalkin' us, eh?" Taylor said anxiously. His heavy lips became as tense as Brant's. "I ain't hankerin' fer no more run-ins with that *hombre*." His eyes narrowed. "They's a plenty rewards out fer you an' me, Luke, an' still standin' over in Texas."

"Yeah, an' we're up ag'in it tuh keep our necks outa a rope," Brant growled. "Red's jest sent me word fer you an' me an' our riders tuh git over in th' Hole and help out while him an' his gang drives them rustled Flyin' C cows down tuh Agua Mucho; says he'll shore clean us out ef we don't."

"An' we're tuh hold th' sack, eh?" Taylor replied surlily. "Nuthin' doin', Luke. Only one thing fer us tuh do ef th' Navajo Kid's around, an' that's tuh play safe an' git outa this yere country *pronto*."

"But Red'll cut us both down," Brant argued, "ef we tries that. He'll hunt us down."

"Then we'll start a little trick ag'in 'im right now, Luke. We'll play law an' order stuff this time. We'll send word up tuh th' sheriff tellin' where Red is an' what he's doin' drivin' them Flyin' C cows away through Murky Pass. Ain't no rope gonna twist *our* necks, 'cause o' Red Dalton."

He led the way inside, scrawled a brief note to the sheriff and sent one of his riders away at a run.

"Give th' sheriff that *pronto*, Pete," he directed. "An' then come rompin' back yere fast. We're workin' our stunt proper an'll need all hands. This time we're fightin' on th' law's side. Red's gittin' too durned bossy, anyway. Sooner we break from 'im th' better fer us all."

The young rider who was to carry the note, glanced at it before riding away. It read:

Luke Brant and me's trailin' the Dalton gang. They are driving a rustled herd through Murphy Pass. Bring a posse and head for there fast.

Neff Taylor.

As the cowboy dashed away, Taylor spoke to Brant.

"Go bring all yore riders over yere, Luke. We'll join forces an' head fer th' sheriff's posse. Sooner Red's cleaned off'n th' map, better fer you an' me."

AS early dawn came, the Navajo Kid rode warily through the mountains, Wild Bill leading the way. They had reached wild, rugged country and often followed twisting trails high up on the mountain ridges.

Finally, they reached the rim of a rock-walled valley and looked down. Green, succulent grass grew down in the bottom, watered by the Murky River.

"The Hole!" Wild Bill whispered. "Belly bad place."

Both drew swiftly back from the rim, dismounted, flung their reins

over bushes and crawled to the rim's edge, peering down from behind boulders. Navajo studied it keenly, foot by foot.

The river, fully a hundred feet wide and swift, flowed southward, passing through, at the south end, a rugged pass between two almost vertical walls. There seemed no other way in or out. And to use that pass, either for entering or leaving, riders and cattle would be forced to swim—and hope to avoid being crushed against the massive rocks jutting out above the river's surface at that narrow point.

But Navajo gave a gasp of surprise as he saw a cattle herd grazing along the river's banks. Not a man or horse was in sight.

"How'd them critters git down inside there?" he asked Wild Bill.

"Tunnel, below us," the Chinaman explained. "Me show you. Come 'long. Folla me."

As they rode along the rim, the Kid noticed Wild Bill dropping pinto beans from time to time, from a little sack tied to his saddle. He rode up beside the Chinaman and dropped one hand down to his gun.

"Whatcha doin', Bill?" he demanded sharply, his suspicions aroused instantly.

But Wild Bill only grinned. "You told boss to follah us," he said, "so I bling beans for mark trail. I tell him watch for 'um."

But just then his horse stumbled. The animal's steel-shod hoofs rang out on stone as Wild Bill jerked up on the reins.

The sound echoed through the silent valley sharply—and brought unexpected results.

From down in the valley, among a grove of cottonwoods, came two roaring shots, then a third. And then Navajo caught sight of a shack among the trees. Men were running out of it, gripping rifles, looking up at him and Wild Bill. And at their head was Red Dalton himself!

Navajo dived headlong from his horse and rolled behind a mass of rocks. Wild Bill was beside him in an instant, both flat on their stomachs, gripping their rifles.

The outlaws vanished back among the trees. A moment more and they appeared again, mounted now and racing for the bottom of the cliff on whose rim Navajo and Wild Bill were concealed. But they were riding through high mesquite and furnished the Navajo Kid no fair shot.

Wild Bill jerked at his shirtsleeve.

"We better go fas'," he whispered. "They come up here quick, through tunnel below."

Darting back to their horses, they flung into their saddles and dashed away southward along the rim, keeping back from its treacherous edge for safety and so as to be out of sight of the outlaws below. Half a mile and they jerked to sliding halts and looked back.

WHERE they had lain behind those rocks, half a dozen outlaws were now sitting their horses, evidently searching for them.

Navajo's eyes narrowed. "Looks like they've got us in a jackpot, Bill," he said. "But there's always an opener, somewheres. Ain't there no way down 'cept that tunnel they just come up through? Seems like there'd oughta be—"

He never finished the remark. Behind him, a sound came. He whirled his horse around, on the very edge of the rim—to face Dalton and several other outlaws within twenty feet of him.

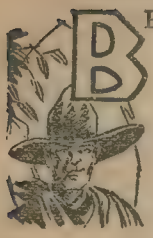
His hand darted down for his gun, but Dalton's rawhide lariat hissed forward and settled around Navajo's body and was jerked tight, pinning his arms to his sides. One part of the loop caught around Navajo's saddle horn. A second rope flashed over Wild Bill's form before the Chinaman could move.

Navajo was almost jerked from the saddle by the tightening noose. He caught one glimpse of Red Dalton's face, teeth bared in a murderous grin.

Then Red Dalton's six-gun rose, aiming straight at the Navajo Kid's stomach!

CHAPTER IV

Hellions on the Loose



BEFORE the weapon could blaze, however, Navajo swung his horse around by leg pressure and flung himself along the animal's far side. But he had been too near the rim. With a crumbling of the rim's edge, his horse shot outward into space. Below, the Murky River roared on its way to the rocky pass at the south end.

Even as his horse shot out over the rim, Navajo glanced back, to see Red Dalton and his horse being jerked along with him. Dalton had tied his lariat to his saddle horn, and was being dragged headlong, with his horse, over the edge! A second more and both men and horses were in the air, in a plunge of death!

In mid-air, the Navajo Kid flung himself from his saddle, felt the rawhide noose slide from his shoulders, and, being an expert diver and swimmer, controlled his body into a clean dive into the waters below.

Dalton, flung headlong from his saddle, hurtled downward, turning over and over. As men and horses struck the water, four great splashes arose. From the outlaws up on the rim and from those below on the opposite bank, loud yells split the air, but the men were helpless to save their leader.

Wild Bill, still up on the rim and bound in the loop of the other outlaw, sat his horse in stony silence, staring down at the river from expressionless eyes.

The Navajo Kid came up to the surface, a dozen feet from his horse, struck out with vigorous strokes, glanced around. Dalton's horse was swimming for the farther bank, and the rawhide lariat, tied to the saddle horn, was floating on the water, almost within reach of Navajo's hand.

Two strokes and he had hold of it and felt himself being towed along behind the horse's powerful strokes. Then Dalton's head appeared above the surface, his arms flopped about wildly and he yelled chokingly. Instantly, Navajo saw that the outlaw chief could not swim. Men and horses were being carried downstream rapidly, straight for those death-dealing rocks below.

"Grab this rope, Dalton!" Navajo shouted above the roar of the water and he tossed the outlaw the end of the rawhide lariat. The outlaw grabbed it and hung on as his horse, fighting against the powerful current, battled for the opposite bank. Navajo gave a sharp whistle and his horse, a dozen yards away, turned instantly and swam beside him. Another moment and the Navajo Kid was back in his own saddle, swimming almost beside Dalton's horse.

None dared to fire at the Navajo Kid. He and Dalton were too close together as the current whirled them and their horses swiftly toward the rocks. Navajo sent his horse abreast of the other animal, grabbed the floating reins and headed for the bank's lowest point. And that side of the bank had a high break in it—a cliff beyond which the outlaws racing along the stream's edge could not ride over, being a sheer wall fifty feet high.

Forced to stop, the outlaws sat their horses in grim silence, watching, helpless either to fire at the Navajo Kid or to assist Dalton, who was sputtering as his horse continued to drag him through the water.

And then both men and their horses were swept around a bend in the stream. Below, not over a hundred yards now, the waters roared over the rocks, a cataract spelling death should any human or living form be drawn into the roaring gorge.

Navajo drove his heels against his horse's sides. The animal grunted, plunged forward—and struck bottom with all four feet! Another moment and both horses were clambering out on the bank.

Navajo looked around at Dalton. The outlaw was still clinging to the end of the rawhide lariat.

"Don't—don't—let me—drown!" he almost screamed at the Navajo Kid.

He was coughing chokingly, water breaking over his face every instant, and was swinging around toward the jagged rocks below—safe only as long as he could find strength to keep hold of the lariat. Against that powerful current, the strain on his arms and fingers was terrific.

Vaulting from his horse, Navajo gripped the lariat and dragged Dalton ashore—and instantly the outlaw's hands leaped down for his guns. But they came away empty. In his fall from the rim, his guns had fallen out and now lay at the bottom of the river. As Dalton's hands moved, so did the Navajo Kid's, but they, too, came away, for his guns had gone the same way.

The outlaw was a huge brute of a man, topping the Navajo Kid by at least two inches above Navajo's six-foot form, weighing over two hundred pounds against Navajo's hundred and eighty-five.

Both men dropped into crouches, facing each other at about fifteen feet distance. Navajo realized no mercy would be shown or expected by Dalton—a battle to the death, there under the scorching sun, beside the roaring river, weaponless, alone. Dalton's rugged face contorted into savagery. The Navajo Kid's took on a grim little smile. Dalton's eyes became red with beast-like fury and hatred. The Navajo Kid's were cool, steady, piercing. Dalton moved forward clumsily. Navajo almost danced in his lightness of foot-movement. The outlaw swung a wild, bone-crushing haymaker at the Navajo Kid's face.

Navajo sidestepped and sent home a powerful solar-plexus blow, followed it up by a terrific right to Dalton's heavy jaw and leaped back, almost laughing as Dalton grunted, bent double and stood hugging his stomach.

Navajo darted in. Both fists drove smashing uppercuts against Dalton's chin, almost lifting the outlaw off his feet. Blood spurted from the outlaw's nose and mouth. He roared a curse and swung wildly. Navajo leaned back, laughed as the two fists flashed past his face, and then he lunged forward, his fists working like pistons as he took to pummeling Dalton's body with in-fighting wallops against the man's ribs.

Again Dalton bent over, forward, the wind knocked out of him for the instant. But he was a bull for punishment, and as awkward. Suddenly Dalton rushed, landed a terrific blow against Navajo's shoulder which whirled the Kid around dizzily, then resorted to kicking. His heavy boot flashed up at the Navajo Kid's groin, but the Kid wasn't there. Instead, his strong fingers shot around Dalton's ankle as the leg was almost waist-high and he jerked sideward with all his strength.

DALTON flopped down on his back, kicking to get loose. Again the Navajo Kid gave that great laugh and his blond head tossed upward, his grey eyes as cool as ever. Then he whirled Dalton around and around, the outlaw's head not more than a few inches above the rocky ground. He released his hold and Dalton shot away, heels over head, to strike the ground heavily, ten feet away.

When Dalton awoke, some minutes later, it was to find his wrists roped tightly behind his back with his own rawhide lariat and the Navajo Kid sitting on a rock, eyeing him grimly. The outlaw tried to roll over, and the movement revealed a slight bulge in his shirt, at the waist. Navajo's eyes suddenly narrowed. He leaped beside Dalton, shoved his hand inside the man's shirt and drew out a .45 revolver. It had fallen from a shoulder-holster Dalton was wearing and had slipped down to his waist, beyond reach.

Navajo laughed. "Take it easy," he said. "Yuh're goin' back tuh town with me—alive. An' yuh knows what that means. Better git prayin'

them Flyin' C riders an' old John Hicks don't find us before yuh're behind th' bars. They'll use yore rope another way, an' *pronto*."

He rose, shook his wide shoulders, led up his own horse and Dalton's, laid the outlaw face downward across Dalton's saddle and roped him to horn and cantle; then mounting and leading the outlaw's horse, headed up a small canyon which seemed to lead to the rim above.

What had become of the outlaws up there, he could not tell, but he wanted to trail back and see if Hicks and the Flying C men were around, and he also wanted to find Wild Bill and rescue him, if he could, from the killers who had captured him.

Dalton was cursing. Then Navajo halted and looked at him coldly.

"Quit yore bellowin', Dalton!" he spoke sharply, "or I'll gag yuh tighter'n hell. I ain't wantin' none o' yore gang tuh hear us up here."

The outlaw relapsed into surly silence, glaring at the Kid from twisted head, legs on one side of the horse, head and arms on the other side.

NAVAJO rode on, leading Dalton's horse just behind in the narrow, shale-rock trail where one false slip of a horse's feet could plunge them both to instant death.

At the top he halted again, studying the rim and valley keenly. He was on the rim opposite that on which he and Wild Bill had been captured. Along the two rims not a figure appeared, but far down the valley, toward the Murky Pass, the outlaws were driving the herd rapidly in that direction.

Navajo's eyes hardened. Something was making those outlaws hurry away.

He rode on, slowly now, listening, hoping for sounds of thundering hoofs which would tell him the Flying C riders were coming. But not a sound came from up the valley. Rounding a slight turn along the rim, he looked across and saw the place where he and Dalton had plunged down into the river—and jerked his horse to a swift halt, a gasp of fury leaping from his lips at what he saw.

Hanging twenty feet below the surface of the opposite rim swung Wild Bill, at the end of a long lariat the loop of which was around his body; and he could see that the Chinaman's wrists had been roped behind his back!

"Holy Moses!" Navajo grunted. "So that's their way uh killin' a man what they think's doublecrossed 'em! Hangin' 'im thataway while he's still alive, in this red-hot sun 'til he passes out by inches!"

He saw Wild Bill's legs move slightly. The Chinaman was still alive then!

Leaping from his horse, Navajo dropped his reins and those of Dalton's horse and went slithering down the dangerous mountainside, clawing with hands and digging in with spurred heels for every hold he could find.

Hands bleeding, toes of his boots scraped open, he finally reached the bottom, darted beside the rushing river and stared up again at Wild Bill's swinging form, and once more he saw the Chinaman's legs wiggle slightly.

Jerking off his boots and chaps, Navajo dived into the stream and struck out with powerful overhand strokes. The force of the current swept him downstream, but he reached the other bank a couple of hundred yards below and scrambled out. Then he climbed up, inch by inch. The wall was almost smooth, but he edged along, hands and feet gripping whatever gave him a hold.

Jagged rocks reared up from below. A single slip and he would be crushed to death instantly. He dared not hurry too much.

But finally he was beside Wild Bill's swinging form. He reached out carefully and gripped the rawhide lariat by which the young Chinaman was suspended, and let go with his feet. He swung back and forth, against Wild Bill's body, half a dozen times before the rope again

settled vertically. Then he swung an arm about Wild Bill.

The Chinaman looked at him from ghastly eyes, unable to speak. Blood smeared Will Bill's face and neck, and Navajo ripped out a savage oath as he saw the top of his head. The Chinaman had been partially scalped!

"Th' damn' hellions!" Navajo gritted.

Someone had jerked Wild Bill's long queue backward and then slashed it off, taking part of the skin with it!

Gripping the lariat above Wild Bill's head, Navajo climbed up, hand over hand, to the rim above, then pulled the Chinaman up beside him and laid him down, took off the cruelly cutting rope and shook him roughly.

"Bill, Bill!" he shouted to arouse the Chinaman's brain. "It's me, th' Navajo Kid!"

Wild Bill's eyes slowly opened, stared up at Navajo dully.

"Them fellah, they—" he muttered.

"Yeah, Bill," Navajo broke in, his eyes as hard as steel, "an' we'll make 'em pay, damn 'em—pay until there ain't a single one of 'em livin'. Think yuh can stand up an' walk a little?"

The Chinaman nodded, and his mind was clearing. Navajo got him on his feet, but Wild Bill could hardly stand. Navajo glanced across the valley to the opposite rim, where he could see his horse still standing, and Dalton's, with Dalton's form still roped across the saddle. He must get back there to the horses. They spelled life and death now, the only way ever to get out of this hell's country.

Suddenly he lifted Wild Bill across his shoulders and started along the rim, seeking a way down the almost vertical wall. Too, he took along the long lariat which had been about the Chinaman's waist. A hundred yards more and he stopped.

A high cottonwood reared its head above the rim, its huge trunk in the valley below. Laying Wild Bill down, Navajo swung his lariat at a stout branch which was within ten feet of his hands. The loop caught, held. Swinging the Chinaman over his shoulder again and making Wild Bill put his arms around his neck, Navajo swung off into space.

Back and forth, violently, they swung for a moment, then hung straight down. The muscles of Navajo's arms and shoulders strained almost to the breaking point. Clawing with his booted feet to find a limb below, Navajo found one. Slowly, breathing stertorously from the exertion, he climbed down inch by inch to the bottom, then set Wild Bill on his feet and stood still until his own breathing became normal.

SUDDENLY he tensed. From up toward the north end of the canyon, came the dull poundings of hoofs, a man's dulled shout. His lips became a hard, white line across his bronzed, blood-stained face. The outlaws were coming back!

Leading Wild Bill again, he stumbled as fast as he could to the river, slid in, holding the Chinaman by the shirt, and struck out with all his strength for the opposite bank. He must reach the horses—his only way of getting away.

Battling with all his might, he reached the shore and clawed up the bank, dragging Wild Bill with him. The cold water had somewhat revived the Chinaman and he rose to his feet. Then he shook himself and straightened, wiped the blood from his face with one yellow forearm and looked at Navajo grimly before he spoke.

"Me all light now, boss," he said. "Where we go?"

"Up top, Bill. I got two broncs up there, an' we gotta ride fast. Hear them fellas comin' back?"

The hoofbeats were growing nearer and nearer and another voice shouted something, but still too far away for Navajo to catch words. Climbing up behind Wild Bill, Navajo fought their way up to the

rim. Several times the Chinaman stopped, seemed about to drop, but Navajo held tight and allowed him to rest on his shoulders. Then up again, inch by inch. As they slid over the rim on their stomachs, Navajo glanced at the spot where he had left his horse, Dalton's and the outlaw. A gasp of amazement burst from his lips.

Dalton and the two horses had vanished!

And those pounding hoofs were coming closer and closer! A grim smile came into Navajo's face. His fingers twisted tensely about the gun in his holster. Wild Bill looked at him despairingly. Navajo drew out the gun and saw that it was loaded.

"An' we only got one gun between us, Bill," Navajo said. "Sorta a tight jam again, eh?" That old laugh broke from his lips recklessly. "But they's generally a way out, if a man has nerve, Bill, an' I reckon we ain't done fer yet. Come on. We can hide, anyway, till we savvies who them fellas is what's bustin' this way."

THEY darted back of some big boulders, flattened down.

Navajo fingered the six-gun, drew back the hammer and laid some cartridges from his belt beside him, ready.

"Mebbe th' boss an' our Flyin' C fellas, boss," Wild Bill said hoarsely. "Mebbeso them pinto beans, they—"

And then the riders swept into sight, coming along the rim straight toward them—and the horsemen were old Hicks and the Flying C cowboys, all spurring hard and holding their guns high and ready for action; and, with them, rode the sheriff from town and a strong posse of some twenty hard-eyed men!

Navajo rose, stepped out into plain sight.

"Reckon them pinto beans did th' business," Bill," he said. "Me, I'm for 'em, strong, hereafter."

Hicks and the men with him stopped before the Navajo Kid and Wild Bill and gazed down at them from trail-weary eyes. They had ridden nearly half the night through the rugged hills.

"Hullo, Navajo!" old Hicks exclaimed. "Shore thought you an' Wild Bill yere'd been cut down by them durned outlaws hours ago. We've rode like all hell, gittin' yere. What's happened? Seen anything of them skunks or my cows?"

Navajo quickly told his story. "But how come th' sheriff an' his posse, boss?" he wound up. "Shore good tuh have 'em here. We'll need every man. Them rustlers is forty strong, at least, an' headin' straight fer that Agua Mucho place yuh told me about, or I miss my guess. How Dalton got loose I can't figger out. Had 'im hawg-tied, I thought. Reckon some o' his gang found 'im while I was gittin' Wild Bill down from that cliff. An' they've swiped our broncs."

"Sheriff's bein' yere with his posse happened thisaway, Navajo," old Hicks explained. "Seems them two skunks I told yuh about—Luke Brant an' Neff Taylor—sent 'im a message that they war trailin' Dalton an' our cows, an' tuh come fast. I ain't savvyin' their play none, but we've come a-rompin', followin' them pinto beans Wild Bill said he'd drop along th' way."

"An' if yuh wants yore cattle back, Boss," Navajo grinned, "we'd oughta git movin'. They're drivin' 'em south an' must be out o' th' pass by now, headin' south *mucho pronto*. Reckon they got wind yuh was comin', way they busted away without tryin' tuh find Dalton." He vaulted up behind Hicks. Wild Bill got up behind another man. "Let's go, fellas!" Navajo shouted. "An' keep yore hands clost tuh yore guns."

All raced away southward along the rim, old Hicks and the sheriff setting a furious pace. Navajo glanced up at the blue sky and judged the hour to be about ten o'clock. The sun was blazing down with all its July power, and they had many miles to go before Agua Mucho would lie before them.

CHAPTER V

Outlaw Stampede

AGUA MUCHO lay squat and sordid, built of flat-roofed adobe buildings. Beyond, the giant mountains of Chihuahua rose majestically, tinged with gold, several miles to the south. The desert still radiated its heat waves above sand and mesquite. Evening was still about an hour away.

Here and there along the town's one street, *serape*-clad Mexicans, wearing huge *sombreros*, leaned against walls, smoking idly, gazing indifferently at their world of dust and rusty tin cans. But some were white men—renegades of the Border, hiders-out from United States' law. Every man was armed, six-guns sagging at hips.

A long, rambling *cantina* stood about halfway down the street, its swinging doors swaying back and forth in the light wind. Inside, along the bar, a motley throng lifted glasses, while others gambled at card tables or danced with native girls at the rear of the long room. A guitar and mandolin squeaked out from a low platform in one corner.

An hour before, Red Dalton and his gang had ridden into town with the stolen cattle, shoved them into a fenced pasture. He was leaning against the bar, his face red from liquor as he related the story of the canyon fight and how he had escaped from his ropes.

A tall, wide-shouldered young Mexican, wearing a ragged old *serape* over head and shoulders, came drifting down the street. He stopped before the batwing doors, looked in from under a huge old *sombrero* that topped his head and listened. Below the long *serape* appeared dusty chaps and high-heeled boots and spurs.

A grim smile flashed across his dust-smeared face. Then he strolled on, puffing at a cigarette, heading down the street towards its south end. No one paid any attention to him. Just another sordid inhabitant of the squalid town, to any who observed him. He was leading a lather-covered horse, on whose back reposed an old saddle with dirty saddle-blanket and rope reins.

But, beyond the southern edge of the town, he stopped, stood looking back. Then, mounting his horse, he rode around to the pasture in which the rustled Flying C cattle were grazing and studied the herd keenly. Every cow had the Flying C brand on its left hip. His eyes narrowed—grey eyes which seemed to hold the light of new steel.

At the north side of the pasture, he was alone. He glanced keenly around. Not a soul was in sight now. Dismounting, he took out a pair of wire nippers from his saddle-bags and cut the wires for a full hundred feet, pulled the wires aside and left the opening free for passage.

As he finished, the sunset was changing into early evening, still bright but the hills gradually taking on their purple. Going back to his horse, he mounted and rode northward slowly until the high mesquite hid him from view. Then he broke into a swift gallop for the foothills half a mile to the north, tossed aside *serape* and *sombrero* and sent forth a ringing, reckless laugh.

In the glow of the late sunset, his blond hair glistened. At a small, dilapidated hovel, he swung down from his saddle and entered. A Mexican lay bound hand and foot on the dirt floor, a gag in his mouth. The Navajo Kid grinned at him.

"Won't be long now, *hombre!*" he said softly. "Jest came back for my hat. I left yours an' yore *serape* out on th' desert."

From a table he picked up his own big grey Stetson, shoved it on his head, went back to his horse and raced away into the hills. Ten minutes later, he was among Hicks' men and the posse.

"They're all there, folks," Navajo told them. "An' yore cattle, Hicks,

is in a pasture jest north o' town. I've cut th' fence aplenty. Let's go."

Old Hicks eyed him keenly, admiringly. "Yuh shore took chances, Navajo," he said. "We war about startin' in tuh find yuh."

Navajo's eyes sparkled with excitement. "Come on, everybody!" he replied. "We'll circle th' town, git our cattle on th' run north, an' then it'll be our night tuh howl."

Following the Navajo Kid, the men circled out, came to the cut place in the fence. The Flying C cowboys dashed inside, swung their hats, batted cows over their backs with their lariats. The posse waited just beyond, guns ready if the town showed alarm. Startled, the cattle broke for the opening in a wild stampede. They passed through, jamming, and went thundering away northward in a huge cloud of dust. The posse and Flying C men dashed close behind the cattle, shouting now and firing off their six-guns.

INSTANTLY, back in the town, bedlam broke loose. Men dashed for their horses. Red Dalton's voice yelled above the rest. In less than a minute, a horde of renegades was riding after the herd at headlong speed, shouting, firing, spurring madly. The Navajo Kid, racing beside Hicks, laughed his old, ringing laugh and shouted to his boss:

"Reckon that hell's busted plumb wide open now. But our cows is headin' straight fer home. Looks like we'll cross th' line clost tuh Neff Taylor's ranch, though. If him an' Brant's still there, an' standin' in with them Dalton *hombres*—"

"We'll shore cut 'em down ef they are, Navajo!" Hicks yelled back.

Gunfire was ripping the evening from all directions, cattle bellowing and thundering away, dust rising high. Voices shouted above the din. Bullets began whining past the Navajo Kid's head, one grazing his shoulder bitingly. He turned in his saddle, glanced back. Several Mexicans were racing toward him and firing rapidly. His gun blazed in a stream and one man fell. Another man's horse catapulted.

"Them *hombres* is shore poundin' leather, boss," the Navajo Kid shouted to Hicks. "I better take some of our fellas an' hold 'em back a little. You keep on with th' herd."

Before Hicks could object Navajo swung his horse aside, shouted to some of the Flying C riders and they went racing away for a small knoll a hundred yards to their northeast. Reaching it, they flung from their saddles and dropped flat, looking back over the crest. A dozen outlaws were coming straight toward the knoll at furious speed, led by Red Dalton himself!

"Git pluggin' 'em, boys!" Navajo yelled, "but leave Dalton. I sorta hanker gittin' that *hombre* alive, which he says no man'll ever do."

From the Flying C men and from the oncoming outlaws, shots screeched out in streams. Bullets whined through the dust-laden air. Men shouted as they fell. Horses, maddened by all the excitement, dashed about, neighing loudly, reins flying.

But the strong position of the Flying C men on the ridge drove the outlaws with Dalton into flight, though they left half a dozen dead on the open plain below.

Dalton seemed not to realize that the renegades riding behind him were racing back to town now. Alone, he came thundering on at breakneck speed, gripping a gun in each hand, his reins over the horn of his saddle. A Herculean figure in the flaming of the setting sun. And then Navajo spoke sharply to the men about him, while his eyes held grimly to Dalton's figure.

"Git goin' fer th' herd, boys!" he directed. "Th' boss'll be needin' yuh bad. I'll handle Dalton."

As the Flying C riders dashed away northward, spurring with all their might, Navajo darted to his horse, vaulted into his saddle and jerked loose his lariat. Sitting the animal just below the ridge's crest, he watched Dalton come on.

Red Dalton came rushing, guns flaming. But suddenly their noise ceased, and the Navajo Kid knew the reason. Their guns were empty, at last.

He sent his restive horse leaping to the top of the ridge, then straight at the outlaw chief, loop flying. It hissed forward, dropped over Dalton's head and shoulders. Navajo jerked it tight and set his horse back sharply on its haunches. Dalton catapulted to the ground, landed heavily on his back, his guns flying from his hands, the breath knocked out of him.

Dalton tried to rise, shouted a vile oath and made an effort to toss off the rope. Navajo sent his horse aside and gave another quick jerk. Again Dalton hit the ground hard.

"I'm keepin' it up till yuh says 'quit,' Dalton," Navajo told him.

"I'll git yuh fer this, yuh damn—" Dalton bellowed as he staggered up.

The Navajo Kid laughed then.

"Yeah?" he replied. "Yuh tried that gittin' me before, up on th' rim." Suddenly he gave a third jerk on the rope and Dalton sprawled again, hard. "Now, damn yuh!" The Navajo Kid's voice became harsh and grim. "Squawk yore tune, or I'll drag yuh plumb tuh pieces."

He started his horse, dragging the outlaw over the sand. Then Dalton yelled.

"Stop, damn yuh! Yuh're killin' me. I—I give up!"

The Navajo Kid pulled his horse to a halt, twirled the rope twice about Dalton's arms and body and sat still. Roped like that, the outlaw was helpless—and knew it. And his guns were gone.

"All right then. Now climb on yore bronc an' we'll be ridin'," was Navajo's curt answer. He boosted him into the saddle.

A moment later, he rode away after the herd, leading Dalton by the rope. Far ahead, the rumbling of the stampede still came, dulled by distance, and occasional shots sounded.

An hour later, the Navajo Kid, leading his prisoner, rode up to the Neff Taylor ranch, before which Hicks and the stern-eyed sheriff and his tired posse were standing, their lathered horses at the hitch-racks. A dozen roped prisoners told that the days of the Dalton gang were about ended.

"Goshalmighty, Navajo!" old Hicks shouted as the Kid halted before them. "Yuh got 'im, eh?"

The Navajo Kid laughed. "Shore did, boss," he replied, tossing the rope's end to him. "An' alive." He pulled back his outer shirt at the neck and revealed a Texas Ranger's badge. "Accordin' tuh Ranger code," he added, "I been after 'im ever since that fight over in th' Big Bend, what I told yuh about. That story I told yuh 'bout me wantin' a ridin' job with yuh was jest so's I could trail Dalton, like my chief told me tuh come over here an' do. I've been back in th' Rangers a month."

BESIDE Hicks, the grizzled sheriff studied Navajo's face keenly, and admiration lay in his eyes. He sent his posse and the prisoners over into the bunkhouse, then spoke to Navajo.

"Son," he said, "yuh've shore won th' thanks o' this yere valley, an' we're thankin' yuh a heap." Then he laughed. "An yuh still got that grey Stetson an' yore blond hair, what's more'n Wild Bill's got left. But I've app'inted 'im a deppity an' sent 'im along up with Hicks' herd. There's a Chink what's white from th' backbone out."

"An' th' Flyin' C's done lost a durn good cook, Navajo. Next time yuh gits hungry—"

"An' that's right now, boss," Navajo grinned. "Lead me to it." But he glanced around curiously. "How come yuh're all here at Taylor's? Yuh had him an' that Luke Brant *hombre* figgered out as bein' in cahoots with Dalton an' his gang."

"An' they war, Navajo," Hicks stated. "Jest heel-dawgs o' his'n, an' low-down renegades—escaped convicts from Texas, accordin' tuh what they've done told us. They was here

when we come drivin' our herd home, an' tried tuh skip out, but we caught 'em cold while they was packin' up. Then they confessed; said yuh war a Texas Ranger an' a hell-go-gitter an' prob'bly after them as well's after Dalton. Told us how come they writ a note tuh th' sheriff here, agin Dalton an' whar he war. Th' sheriff's sent 'em up tuh town an's holdin' 'em thar in his jail fer yuh, ef yuh wants luggin' 'em back tuh Texas."

He turned to the sheriff and passed him the end of the rawhide lariat. The loop was still about Dalton's shoulders. "Yere, Bob, take this durned polecat. Reckon he's rode his last long-loop trail. Next ride'll prob'bly be with his danged laigs a-kickin', specially ef my Flyin' C boys now drivin' th' herd tuh town gits their hands on 'im afore yuh claps 'im inside yore calaboose. Come on inside, Navajo, an' I'll git yuh that grub."

He and Navajo turned and went inside the house, but suddenly they stopped, tense, listening. From outside came the sounds of a terrific struggle, then a shot, followed by a man's running feet.

The two men leaped back to the door, flung it open and dashed out, guns in hand. The sheriff lay in a heap, blood trickling from a wound in his shoulder, and Dalton was

flinging himself into the saddle of one of the horses tied to a hitch-rack. The sheriff was trying to raise his gun, but his arm sank.

Dalton, in the saddle, whirled his horse and glanced back, saw Navajo and Hicks, and the gun in his hand roared heavily. The Navajo Kid staggered slightly as a slug seared along the flesh of his left thigh. Then his gun blazed—twice, before Dalton could fire again.

The outlaw emitted a horrible gasp, jerked half double and pitched from his saddle, headlong, and lay sprawled out grotesquely, face downward, in the sand. Navajo and Hicks walked warily toward him, guns ready for treachery. The sheriff, clambering to his feet, came slowly forward. His shoulder was bleeding less and his eyes were grim with controlled anger at Dalton's trick. The men of the posse, over inside the bunkhouse with the prisoners, came running out, guns held for quick action.

NAVAJO leaned over and turned Dalton on his back, saw the glassy eyes. He holstered his gun and straightened.

"Reckon I ain't takin' 'im back alive after all," he remarked quietly. "He's daid."

"It was him or us, Navajo," the sheriff stated as he stood looking down at the body. "After you two went in th' house, he musta got loose somehow or other, an' come at me like a wildcat before I could git limbered up." He laid a hand on Navajo's shoulder. "Yuh'll git plenty rewards, son, an' I'm hopin' yuh'll stay yere. I'll make yuh my head deppity."

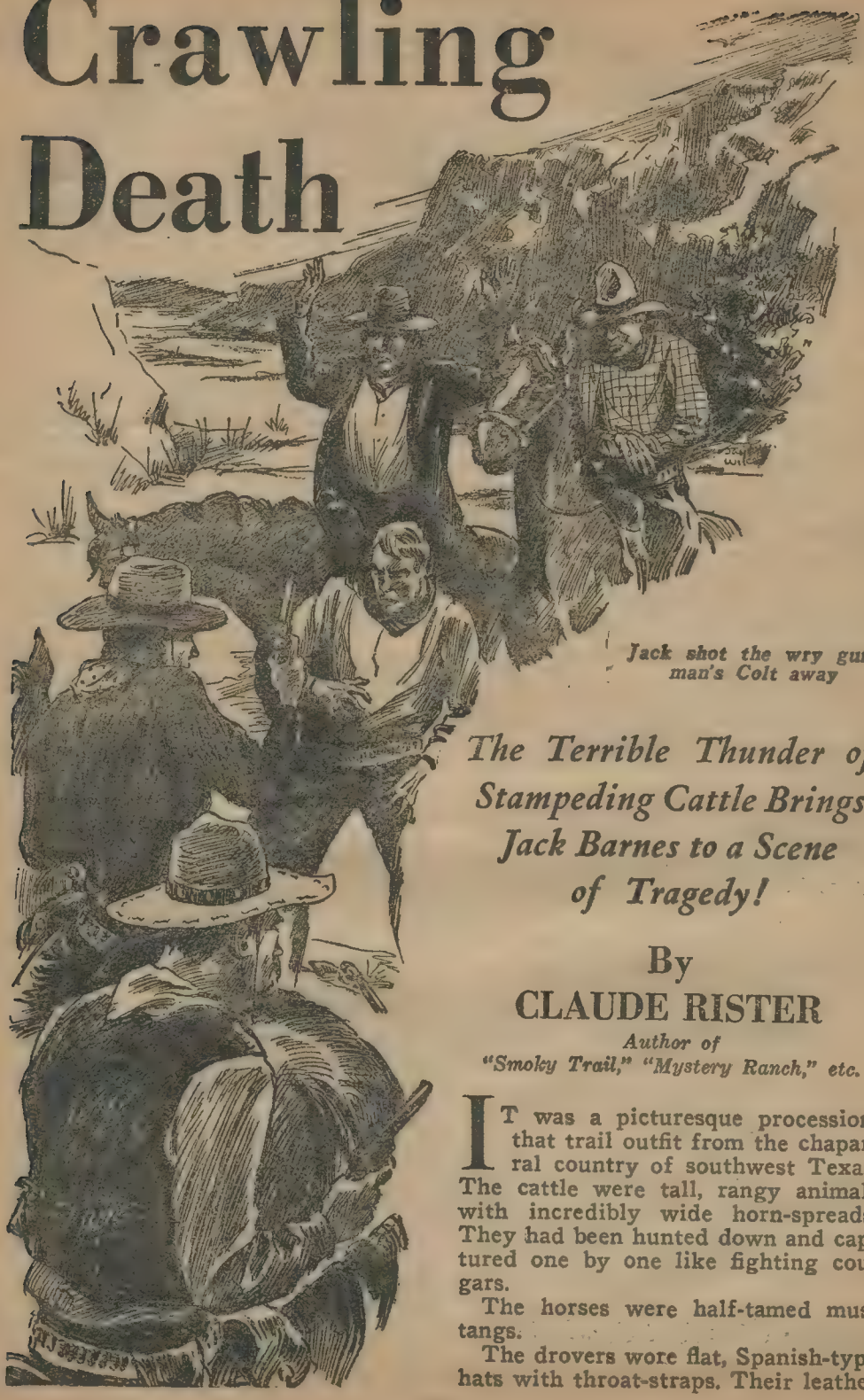
"No yuh won't," Hicks grinned, grabbing Navajo's arm. "He's on my Flyin' C payroll right now, an stayin' there. Ain't that so, Navajo?"

The Navajo Kid gave that joyous laugh again, tossed his blond head and eyed Hicks' friendly face.

"Trouble with me is, Hicks," he replied, "I can't never seem tuh settle down nowheres for long. Sort of a wanderin' *hombre*. I only took back my old Ranger job 'cause th' gov'ner wanted tuh prove that a Ranger always gits his man. After I've delivered th' goods to 'im this time, no tellin' what may be happenin' somewheres else, an' I like bein' kinda movin' round."

He laughed again and slapped Hicks on the shoulder. "But I'm shore thankin' you fellas jest th' same," he said earnestly, "an' stayin' with yuh for that meal o' steak an' onions what I'm smellin' inside."

Crawling Death



Jack shot the wry gunman's Colt away

The Terrible Thunder of Stampeding Cattle Brings Jack Barnes to a Scene of Tragedy!

By
CLAUDE RISTER
Author of
"Smoky Trail," "Mystery Ranch," etc.

IT was a picturesque procession, that trail outfit from the chaparral country of southwest Texas. The cattle were tall, rangy animals with incredibly wide horn-spreads. They had been hunted down and captured one by one like fighting cougars.

The horses were half-tamed mustangs.

The drovers wore flat, Spanish-type hats with throat-straps. Their leather

brush jackets, double-barreled chaps, leather cuffs and cuplike *tapaderas* all bore many thorn scars. As untamed and as tough as the cattle they drove and the broncs they rode, were those cowpunchers from the southwest Texas brush country; but honest, sincere, as true as steel was every man of that crew.

Owner of the longhorn herd was Jack Barnes, a man's man if ever there was one. He was a stalwart young ranchman who sat up straight in his saddle and looked the world squarely in the face. His visage was strongly chiseled, habitually serious, so deeply bronzed that his eyes were like blue ice in contrast.

The outfit was approaching that treacherous stream, the Double Mountain River. There was just a hint of anxiety behind the boldness in Jack Barnes' eyes, for all day there had been thunderheads to westward, and he feared quicksand.

Veteran of the Texas ranges that he was, he knew that sands of such streams as the Double Mountain might be as firm as hardpan during dry spells, but that they were "quicky" and dangerous when rains raised the underflow of brackish water of those broad, snaking grey stretches.

JACK had sent a rider ahead to inspect the river for a ford, and to pick out a campsite. Just now the straight backed young ranchman was riding at the point of the herd, watching for his scout's return.

Suddenly he stiffened. To his foreman, who was riding by his side, he said: *"Now,* I wonder what's wrong!" A horseman had burst from the cedar-brakes ahead, and was coming pell-mell.

"Lookee! There goes one of Tensley's men!" said lanky old Slim Patterson, and he rammed a bony finger to westward. Over there, half a mile away, a rider was streaking over a hogback. "I figger both him and our scout made an important discovery, and now they're tryin' to beat each other to the report."

This conjecture proved correct. Jack's rider dashed up and yapped through a cloud of gyp-dust:

"The river's all right, Jack, but we got to beat Tensley's outfit to the ford! There's a dandy campsite just beyond; sweet water and good grazin'! Sonora Zack Harder found it about the same time I did, though, and he's high-tailin' to tell his boss! The outfit that gets over last is going to have a camp with gyp-water and poor pickin's!"

"We're gettin' over first," Jack Barnes declared. "Swing back along the flanks, Jim, and tell the boys to start proddin' the critters harder."

The young cowboy grinned through the dust, spurred his mount, and went pattering away. A short time later the string of tawny bodies was moving forward at a lumbering trot. Jack kept watching the long hogback a mile to westward. Over there behind that great groundswell, was Wal Tensley's outfit, marching parallel with his own. Jack's lean jaws tightened grimly when a thickening of the red dusthaze which showed above the hilltop, told him that Tensley, too, was prodding his stuff hard.

For a week the two outfits had been traveling parallel.

Several times they had clashed over crossings, waterholes, bedgrounds. Twice there had almost been gun-violence.

Jack's outfit reached the Double Mountain River first. So close had been the race that Tensley had to quickly mill his stuff to keep the herds from mixing. Jack and lanky, leathery, droopy mustached Slim Patterson drew aside from the herd and waited when they saw Tensley and two of his riders coming for a powwow.

The three riders came up and halted. Tensley was a chunky, pudding-faced, pop-eyed man who looked and dressed more like a town-man than a rancher. Indeed, he was a tenderfoot, having inherited his spread. The two men with him were Sonora Zack Harder, and Rio Frank Yancey.

Sonora was a small, swart man with a mean, narrow face. Rio was tall,

dreamy-eyed, slouchy, lantern-jawed. Both were feared gunmen.

Tensley burst out: "You've pulled another dirty trick, Barnes! I was closest to the river; had the right of way! Yuh whooped up your stuff and cut me off!" His broad, pudgy face was mottled with dust and anger.

"There's no right of way to it, Tensley," Jack said quietly. "When parallel trail outfits make for the same point, the one that gets there first gets the pickings."

"I offered to throw in with you the first day we contacted! If you hadn't been a trailhog there wouldn't have been any squabbles!"

"Yuh know why I refused, Tensley. My longhorns are clean. Yore stuff is from a fevertick and blackleg country. Yore trail is dotted with critters you've lost. I want to reach market with all my stuff."

The argument grew hotter. Tensley was a man of violent temperament. Sonora put in. The snake-eyed little gunman was forever spoiling for a fight. He and his boss cursed Jack and Slim. They cursed back. Suddenly guns were leaping from holsters.

JACK beat Sonora to the draw, and shot the wiry gunman's Colt away. It would be a long time before the clawlike hand would wield another gun. He cursed like a madman as he slung blood from it.

Rio shaded Slim Patterson, but the old foreman touched his bronc with the spurs and the mustang sprang. Rio's slug missed Slim's head by an inch. The foreman's ball of lead ripped a bloody gash across Rio's lantern jaw. The gunman reeled; his mount snorted and pivoted. The rider flopped to the ground.

As for Tensley—that tenderfoot gunman had ceased his draw abruptly as Jack's gun had jumped to cover him.

Rio got up, stumbled drunkenly about. Blood was streaming from the gash across his jaw. Dazedly he spotted the two riders who were quietly sitting their mounts, holding menacing six-guns. He mumbled an oath and looked about for his own pistol.

"Leave it!" snapped Jack. "Get on yore horse, then the three o' yuh dust!"

Sullenly Rio obeyed. The three riders headed for their own outfit. All were mouthing threats—Sonora profanely, viciously, the while alternately nursing his wounded hand and slinging blood from it.

"I reckon that'll hold 'em for a while," grimly remarked Slim, as he holstered his long Colt; but Jack wagged a dubious head: "I'm not so shore. Mebbe it's jest the beginnin' o' gun trouble."

The whole thing had happened so quickly that none of the other hands of either outfit had made a move to join in. Tensley's riders were holding his milling herd. Jack's were keeping the Lazy J B longhorns marching across the river. Jack and Slim now turned back to join them.

The two outfits made camp half a mile apart that night. Jack's location was ideal. That which Tensley selected had sparse grass, and the camp must depend on the river for water. The water of the Double Mountain is drinkable, but always flat and bitter. Jack's tough crew of brush snappers kept chuckling as they imagined how Tensley and his riders must be cussing.

Two punchers on their way back down the trail, stopped at the Lazy J B camp for supper that night. One of them told Jack that twenty miles ahead of him was a ranchman who was making money, buying lean trail stuff, fattening it on his excellent range; then driving it on to market. He was paying the right prices, too; as good as could be had for lean stuff at the regular markets.

"I heard him say he could use about a thousand head more," the cowboy stated.

There was nearly a thousand head in Jack's longhorn herd, and so he decided to ride ahead and see the ranchman buyer. If he could consummate a good deal, the rest of the drive to market would be saved. But

it would be wise to act immediately, else Tensley might hear of this opportunity and try to beat him to it.

After supper Jack saddled a fresh horse. To old Slim Patterson he confided his plan to call on the ranchman that night. "Guard the critters well," He cautioned earnestly. "I don't like them thunderheads over there, and I like the closeness of Tensley's outfit still less."

A few minutes later he was riding away into the gathering night.

On a hilltop he paused and looked back. A quarter of a mile down there his campfire was glowing warmly. He could see dimly, the loyal punchers whom he loved almost as brothers; some moving about, others squatted beside the fire.

His eyes turned to the campfire of his enemy. He imagined that there was something sinister in its glow; in the way its flames licked and swayed. To him the dim forms that he could see down there were like those of skulking wolves.

A jagged flash of lightning drew his attention to the pile of clouds in the west. He shook his head worriedly. The night was pregnant with several species of portentousness. He hated to go away from his camp—but then he wanted to see that cattle buyer as soon as possible.

The young trail drover's premonitions as to the ominousness of the night were to prove well founded. Before morning was to break there was to be gunfire, bloodshed, and horror there on the Double Mountain River.

THAT night Wal Tensley lay wide awake for a long time under his tarp, gazing up at the stars in the blue-black sky and trying to think of some way to get even with Jack Barnes. He had hated Jack before, but after the affair of that day—after he and his two pet gunmen had been humiliated in the eyes of the rest of both crews—that hatred had become poisonous.

The pudgy fellow was a shrewd man—he had been a land shark before he had inherited his ranch. Just now he was using all that foxy sagacity in an attempt to conceive of some plan for revenge.

But Wal Tensley feared the stalwart, straight-backed young ranchman and his thorn-scratched crew. And so the fox finally went to sleep without deciding upon any scheme for revenge.

A hand shook Tensley awake, and he sat up blinking. He recognized the shadowy form beside him as Rio, his trail boss. He could dimly see the white patch on the man's wounded jaw. "I thought you ought to know," the foreman said. "The herd is very restless. The critters are liable to roll their tails and bolt any minute."

Tensley looked around into the night. It was very dark. A gentle wind was blowing from the east. In the southwest was an ominous cloud, the top of which reached to the zenith of the heavens. Lightning kept the darkness aquiver. Thunder boomed and rumbled.

"What time is it, Rio?"

"Nearly daybreak." The foreman hesitated, reluctant to tell what next he had to say; then he blurted: "There was nearly a stampede a while ago. Half a dozen got through, but the boys held the rest. I chased the ornery ones right down to the river. The fool things tried to cross, and—went down."

"You mean—"

"I mean it has been rainin' nearly all night up the river, and the risin' underflow has made the sand as quicky as mush. It's creeping death, boss."

Tensley scrambled out of his pallet, cursing on account of the loss of the cattle; then suddenly he paused.

"Quicksand! Creeping death!" he whispered hoarsely.

Noting the subdued excitement in the voice, Rio peered closely into his boss' face. "Yeah, but what's on yore mind?"

Tensley said slowly: "Rio, suppose those wild-eyed Lazy J B longhorns should stampede and head for the river tonight!"

Rio was silent for a moment; then

he said flatly: "They'd die like flies, which same I reckon would about even us with Jack Barnes—only—"

"Only what?"

"The job would want to be pulled off in some foxy way, so's they wouldn't know we done it. That's a mighty hard shootin' crew over there."

"Any suggestions?"

Rio thought for a moment; then: "Bein' a tenderfoot, yuh likely don't know it, but there's nothing gets on a critter's nerves more than the smell of burning hair. Reminds him of the time he felt the hot iron. If them longhorns should smell hair fumes, restless as they already must be, they'd likely stampede with the first thunderclap. That little mattress of yore'n, the only one in camp, is padded with hair, ain't it, Mr. Tensley?"

"It is—but how do we know the cattle would head for the river?"

"It's an even chance they would, since there are bluffs on two sides of their bedground."

And so the brutal plot was laid. Since Tensley could ill afford to take any of his men away from his own restless herd, he decided to carry out the scheme alone. A short time later he was riding away into the night, with his little mattress roll across the saddle in front of him.

Beside a little cutwash half way between his camp and the other, he stopped and got down. The cutwash would keep the fire from being seen. The hair fumes would rise, and the breeze would waft them across to the enemy's camp.

Tensley gathered broomweeds and tumbleweeds, crushed them together, and strung them for a distance of thirty feet along the little watercut. On top of these he carefully placed the hair taken from his ripped open mattress.

Now all was ready. There was a vengeful set to his fat jaws as he struck a match and touched its flame to the highly inflammable weeds.

Tensley hurried to his horse and swung up. By this time morning was beginning to break. He must get away from the place. If he stayed around too long he might be seen by some of the Barnes outfit.

A little way from the cutwash he paused and looked back. He could see dimly that fumes were rising thickly from the narrow cutwash, but they were drifting straight upward. He noticed now for the first time that the wind had completely died since he had left camp.

He rode over into a hillside ravine and waited. The breeze would come again in a minute. He wanted to see the effect of that fire; to see if the longhorns would head for the river, in case they stampeded.

Lightning was still splitting the heavens; thunder still crashing. Big drops of rain began to *pat-pat-pat* slowly about him. Suddenly came a gust of moist wind—but he did not notice it. A cold voice had said:

"What are yuh doin', skulking here?"

JACK BARNES had consummated his cattle deal and got back just as day was breaking. Bickering, and the intense darkness of the night, had prevented his earlier arrival. From a hill-rim he had seen a streak of fire, apparently down in a cutwash. A moment later he had seen the dim form of a horseman, disappear into a ravine.

He had circled, quit his horse in some cedars, and slipped up behind the mounted skulker. Suspicion had leaped through his mind when he had recognized Wal Tensley.

At sound of Jack's voice Tensley jerked his head around and gave him an almost horrified glance. Wild with excitement he jerked out his six-gun, flung a shot at the ranchman; then socked spurs to his mount and went tearing down the hillside ravine.

"Why, yuh doggoned dirty skunk!" Jack yelled in surprise, as a bullet whiffed within an inch of his right ear. He yanked out his own gun and began throwing lead at the fleeing rider.

Lightning showed him Tensley's horse going into a somersault; the ranchman's form rising from the

saddle as the fellow began a forward dive.

With the suddenness characteristic of Texas thunderstorms, rain burst from the heavens in a torrent. Wind dashed water into Jack's grim face, whipped it about him—but he paid no heed. His whole mind at the moment was centered upon capturing Tensley.

The sky-mountain of black clouds and the pouring rain had rendered the gloom intense again. Jack could see very little ahead, but he heard the flop of saddle leather, the thrashing of the fallen horse, a crashing of bushes and a plopping of boots.

Tensley had picked himself up and was again in flight. Jack went plunging recklessly in pursuit, narrow bootheels tearing up gravel at each bound.

Suddenly he stopped. Faintly he could hear a barking of six-guns and a yelling of men. Stampede!

BUT so muffled were the sounds by the snarling rain, the wind, the constant thunder, the walls of the ravine, that he could not tell from what direction they came.

He wondered which it was, his herd or Tensley's, that was in mad flight into the darkness. In his excitement he had entirely forgotten the streak of fire he had seen.

With a muttered exclamation he wheeled and started churning his way back up the ravine. So fierce was the downpour that already the slope was slippery, and tiny rivulets were grooving the loose soil.

He found his horse and flung himself to leather. He had reloaded his six-gun as he ran. Roweling his horse he went tearing and sliding down the hillside. Bushes whipped him unmercifully, but he was used to brush. He reached the cedar dotted flat; then went streaking recklessly toward his campsite.

The night seemed filled with yells and pistol shots. And above the incessant thunder he could hear a rumbling of hoofs.

Suddenly he found himself right at the edge of an avalanche of bovine bodies. His heart went sick when he saw that the cattle were rushing from the direction of his bedground, that they were headed straight for the river. Drawing his six-gun he went racing alongside that hurtling stream of bulks, yelling and shooting as he rode.

Joints crackled. Horns clicked. Now and then there was a crunching of bones as a critter went down and was stormed over by others.

The dim form of a pounding rider appeared not far from Jack. He heard the popping of the horseman's six-shooter; saw spurts of fire as the hard riding horseman strove to turn the stampede—or was he hastening it? The next moment the lightning showed Jack a horrible sight.

Cattle were pouring over a bluff. They bawled, and twisted their bodies grotesquely as their hindparts flew up and they went over. He could hear the crushing thud of bulks. Others were rushing in a veritable avalanche into a slanted draw which would lead them onto the river quicksands. Still others were shunting aside and tearing away along the bank. These would scatter into the brakes, and many would never be found.

Over beyond this rushing herd he could see the flitting forms of riders, spurring like mad to get ahead of the stampeding cow-brutes.

Jack saw it all during one flash of lightning; then his attention was jerked away from the horrible sight. The horseman close ahead of him had taken a terrible flop. It was dangerous riding there. The pony got up and galloped on, but the rider lay still.

Jack was quickly at his side. He saw that it was Rio. There was nothing more to be done about the stampede just then; so the young ranchman gave his attention to the injured man. Rio's chest was caved in.

The storm ceased as suddenly as it had begun. With its cessation came a renewing of the dawn.

Rio opened his eyes and stared at Jack for a moment; then he whispered: "Yuh're white, Barnes. Sorry

for the cows. It was horrible! Tensley burned hair—stampeded 'em. The curving cliffs north o' yore camp turned 'em toward the river. It was fate. The way the wind—"

The whisper faded. Rio was dead.

Jack got up, straddled leather, and rode on to the river. The greying morning and the lightning showed him many tawny bodies just disappearing into the quicksands. Doubtless many others had already been sucked under. He turned away to the bluff over which he had seen cattle pouring.

Again his heart went sick, when he got down and looked over its brink. He mounted and rode fifty yards to a little gulch. Scattered along it were about a dozen steers with broken necks.

His walnut-brown face was rigid, his blue grey eyes glittery as he set out at a gallop through the cedars, hackberries, and chinaberry trees, heading for Tensley's camp.

Halfway there he saw Tensley walking hurriedly along. Doubtless the fellow had kept hidden somewhere in the hillside ravine until he was sure that Jack was no longer in pursuit of him; then he had stolen out and headed for his camp.

At sight of the stalwart, straight-backed rider, Tensley halted short; then wheeled and ran for a stand of cedars. But, six-shooter drawn, Jack spurred after him and quickly ran him down. Realizing that he would have no chance in a daylight shoot-out with the Southwesterner, Tensley threw up his hands in surrender and begged for mercy.

"It was Rio's idea! The—the stampede, I mean!"

"Liar!" Jack's voice fairly cracked. "I'm goin' to show yuh what yuh've done. Lift yore gun and drop it."

Tensley obeyed. Jack slipped back onto his horse's rump.

"Now get up into the saddle and head for the river. I'll be holding a gun against yuh all the time."

Again the ranchman obeyed.

The first sight of horror which Jack showed his captive was the crushed body of Rio. "There may be others." Next they went to the river bank. Jack pointed to the crawling streak of quicksand. "God knows how many of the poor critters went down out there. About two-thirds of the herd shunted away down the river. Many of them critters will never be rounded up."

They turned to the bluff. Jack made Tensley get down and look over the brink. The fellow took just one fleeting peep, shuddered; then turned back. His face was quivering and pasty.

NEXT Jack headed for the gulch wherein a dozen steers lay with broken necks. A few yards from the draw he ordered a halt. He had heard a pattering of hoofs. A rider broke out of the cedars and came toward them. It was Slim Patterson.

"I seen you two cutting across the flat," the old foreman explained as he came up and halted, "so I—"

Jack snapped at Tensley: "Get down!" The fellow obeyed. Jack dismounted also. To Slim he said: "I want to show this skunk another tragedy he caused."

"I got to thinkin' about our bedground," Slim said as he, too, swung down, "and what with the storm coming up I took the liberty of moving our herd over into a big cliffbound pocket where the critters would be easier to hold."

Tensley whirled: "What's that?"

Jack seized the pudgy man by collar and pants seat; rushed him to the brink of the gulch. His voice clicked as he said: "It happens the wind changed completely around jest after yuh'd set that fire tonight, Tensley. Now get down there and take a look at those cattle."

With a shove and a boot he sent the ranchman sprawling on top of a bovine body. Jack then turned and said wearily: "Let's get away from here, Slim. The sights have made me sick."

As they swung to leather and started away, they heard a blubbering cry come up out of the little gulch:

"My God! I'm ruined! I stampeded my own cattle!"

Justice *on the* Range

A Complete Novelette of Western Law

By A. LESLIE

Author of "Hell's Home Trail," "The Border Ranger," etc.

They leaped through

CHAPTER I

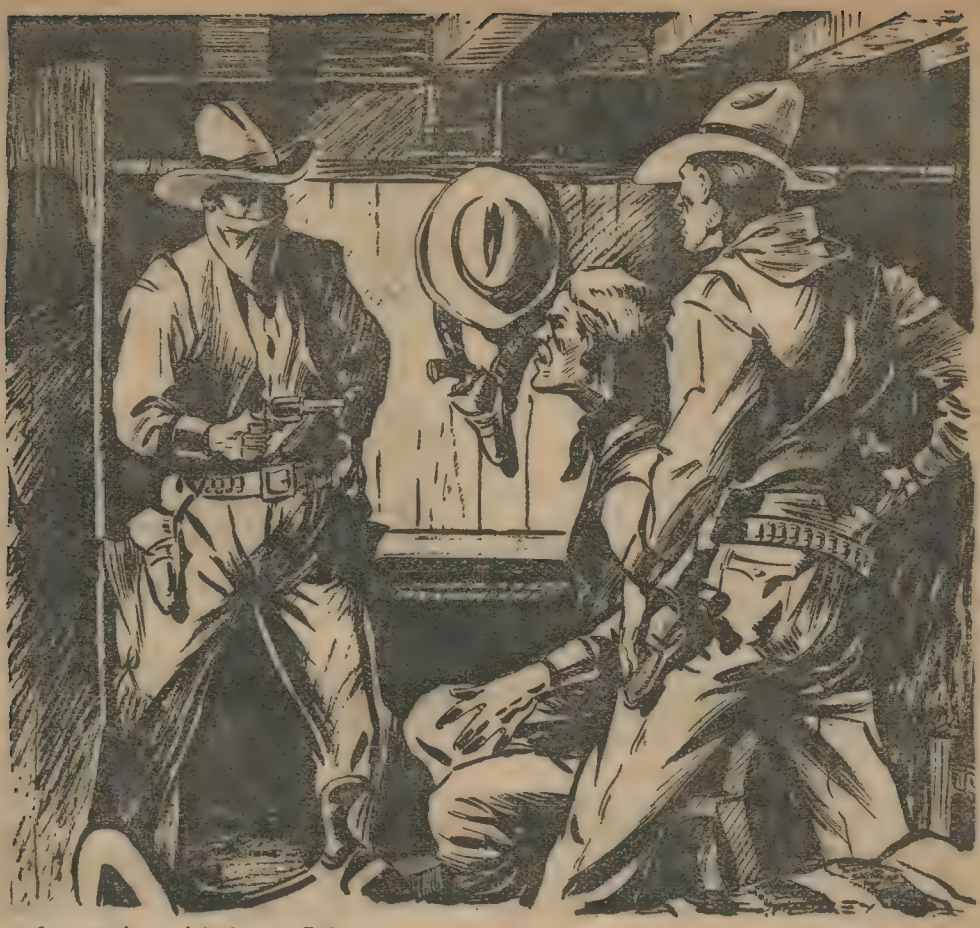
Snatch

CRASH! The front door of the Lazy-M ranchhouse ripped loose from its hinges and slammed on the floor. Through the opening leaped four men with drawn Colts. They wore wide-brimmed hats pulled low over their eyes. The lower parts of their faces were masked by red handkerchiefs.

Old John Mason, owner of the Lazy-M, was so utterly astounded he could only sit with hanging jaw and goggling eyes. His foreman, Bigfoot Boldt, reached for his gun. The long barrel of a six-gun rapped Bigfoot smartly over the head and he lost all interest in subsequent proceedings. That brought old John to his feet with a wordless roar.

Another of the masked men hit Mason, not as hard as Bigfoot was hit, but hard enough to daze him. Two others seized him by the arms and rushed him out of the house. They flung him, limp and groggy, across the withers of a horse ridden by a fifth man. Then the four men mounted horses held ready by the fifth man and the darkness quickly swallowed all five. It also swallowed John Mason.

The boys in the Lazy-M bunkhouse heard the commotion, but by the time they had slipped on boots and got the door open a dying click and clatter of fast hoofs was all that remained of the incident. They crossed the hundred yards between bunkhouse and ranchhouse at a dead run, guns ready, and found Bigfoot trying to pull himself up by the table.



the opening with drawn Colts

Hell boiled and bubbled at the Lazy-M. Bigfoot, his scalp split open and bleeding profusely, could do little more than swear complicated oaths that set the air to smoking and sizzling.

"How many times I got to tell you," he roared, "that all I saw was four jiggers with rags tied 'round their haids bust the door open and barge inter the room? Somebody hit me with a fence-post or somethin' and then all I seen was stars. No, I don't know what happened to the Old Man, and I don't know wheah he went. I was too busy countin' comets!

"Yuh say you heahd hosses goin' away? Why didn't you say so at fust? Tie this damn leak in my haid up for me, Austin. The rest of yuh fork yore broncs and see if you can pick up the trail. Yeah, damn it! Saddle mine, too! Who says I can't ride?"

The Lazy-M rannies picked up the trail—it led southeast—and quickly lost it. The ranchhouse sat near the southeast corner of the Lazy-M spread and beyond it was a wild jumble of hills and canyons that sprawled and gouged all the way to the New Mexico line. A Yaqui tracker couldn't have followed the trail of a spilled sack of flour through that propped up section of Hell. The punchers wandered about through the canyons until morning

Thunder in a Roundup of Sidewinders!

and then rode back home, cursing everything and sundry.

"It's a kidnapin', that's what it is!" declared young Tom Austin.

"Kidnapin', hell!" rumbled Bigfoot. "That ain't done to sixty-yeah-old bald-headed coots what weigh

two hundred pounds! That's done to kids!"

But Tom Austin was right. Bigfoot sent for the sheriff, but before he arrived, a frightened Mexican rode up to the Lazy-M.

"*Maldito!* It ees the *Senor* Beegfoot which I seek," he mouthed. "Thees I was told to geev heem."

He held out a dirty scrap of paper. Bigfoot unfolded it, read the contents and outdid all his former swearing efforts:

> We got Jon Mason. You kin have him for $20,000. You got ten days to get the money. If you ain't got it by then we will send you one of Jon's fingers. We will send one each day till we get the money. Fingers all gone we send a arm. Then we send his hed. This ain't no dam foolin' Put money on the flat rock top Old Baldy. We will watch. Don't bring no dam sheriffs. We mean bizness.
>
> Bart Cole and Men.

"Black Bart Cole's outfit!" babbled Bigfoot between curses. "The wust gang of sidewinders and horned toads in the hull Southwest! If this ain't hell!

"Wheah'd yuh get this, you?" he demanded of the Mexican.

"*Sangre de Dios!* In White Horse Canyon," replied the *peon*. "Men ride from behind rocks. They geev me money to breeng it. They also geev me thees!"

He touched a ragged knife wound that puckered a swarthy cheek.

"They say," he added, "that if I do not breeng note to *Senor* Beegfoot, they catch me and next time cut three eenches lower, and deeper. *Caramba*, that ees my neck!"

Bigfoot grinned in spite of his worry. "They're a salty outfit, all right," he admitted. "Tell the cook to tie a rag 'round yore haid and give you somethin' to eat."

Sheriff Ben Ralston arrived shortly afterward. With him came Betty Mason, old John's daughter. She had been visiting in Cochise, the county seat. Her face went white when she read the note.

"Twenty thousand dollars! It might as well be twenty million!"

"The spread's wuth a hull lot more'n that, Betty," said Bigfoot.

"Certainly it is," she agreed, "but try and get twenty thousand on it! I'd be lucky to borrow ten. I don't even know if I could borrow anything on it, and I certainly couldn't sell. Remember, I'm not of age, Bigfoot—I won't be twenty until next month, and everything is in Dad's name. What do you suggest, Sheriff?" she asked Ralston, who had been talking with the Mexican.

"I'm scared this is a job I can't handle," admitted the sheriff. "Yuh see, I'm jest a county officer. Looks like John is outa the county right now. If he ain't, he's liable to be any time. Send for the Rangers."

THE sheriff himself rode with Bigfoot to Ranger headquarters at Cochise. They took the Mexican along.

"This is sho' somethin' new in my experience," he declared. "Kidnapin' a rich ranchman and holdin' him for ransom. That ain't never been done in this country befo'. Trust Black Bart Cole to figger out a 'riginal brand of hellishness!"

Captain Morton of the Arizona Rangers listened to Bigfoot's story, asked a few questions and summoned an assistant.

"See if Hatfield's got back yet," he ordered.

"Jest got in and's eatin'," said the clerk. "I'll get him."

Soon afterward Ranger Rance Hatfield entered. He was dusty and travel-stained. Nearly a week's growth of beard darkened his lean

cheeks, for he had been on a mission that had taken him far back into the bleak fastnesses of the Tonto Hills. He had brought three prisoners with him to Cochise.

"Yuh know Bigfoot Boldt, don't yuh, Rance?" asked Morton.

"Uh-huh. Howdy, Bigfoot? H'are-yu, Sheriff?"

Hatfield lounged his more than six feet of sinewy height against Morton's desk and rolled a cigarette while Bigfoot talked. When the Lazy-M foreman had finished his story he shook his black head.

"Ain't no job fer the Rangers," he said quietly.

"What the hell?" demanded Bigfoot, staring. Captain Morton also stared, but he had learned long ago that when Rance Hatfield made a statement he knew what he was talking about. Hatfield turned to the Mexican.

"Wheah yuh say yuh was when they give yuh that note, Pedro?" he asked.

"White Horse Canyon, *senor*—near the eastern mouth."

"Uh-huh, and which way did the men give it to you ride away?"

"They rode east, *senor*."

Hatfield nodded, and turned to Morton.

"White Hoss Canyon runs 'crost the New Mexico line," he said. "East end of it is in New Mexico, *not* Arizona. Old Baldy, wheah they say they want the money put, is that flat-topped mountain 'crost the Line in New Mexico. They're holdin' John in New Mexico. Arizona Rangers ain't got no 'thority in New Mexico. See?"

"Yeah, and theah ain't nobody got no 'thority in them damn brakes t'other side the New Mexico line!" wailed Bigfoot.

"Looks like our hands are tied," admitted Morton.

"It's hell!" said the sheriff. "I'd depended on the Rangers. If you fellers can't mop up this mess, nobody can. Looks like pore old John is a goner!"

Hatfield was thinking, and saying nothing. Now he spoke.

"Boss," he said, "I got a idea. You and Connell, the Big Noise in the Department of Justice, are friends, ain'tcha? Uh-huh, that's what I rec'lect. All right, get Connell on long distance telephone. Don't waste no time."

While the clerk was getting Washington on long distance, Rance outlined his plan. Morton, dubious at first, waxed enthusiastic before Rance had finished. Shortly the clerk announced Washington, with Connell, Director of Investigation, U.S. Department of Justice, on the wire. Morton had served with Connell in the war.

A staccato conversation ensued. Finally Captain Morton hung up the receiver and turned to Rance.

"Yuh ain't a Arizona Ranger no more for a while," he announced. "Yuh're a Gov'ment man, now—Department of Justice agent. Confirmation of yore appointment is bein' rushed by mail. Yuh don't need to wait on that, though."

Bigfoot let out a whoop of excitement, and coined a new word: "Workin' for the Federal Gov'ment—a *'G-man'!* Yuh can go anywheah now, Rance. Yuh got 'thority all over the country!"

Rance nodded, very seriously. "That's what I need. Black Bart covers lots o' territory. Say, it's lucky I ain't had a shave for quite a while, ain't it?"

CHAPTER II

Dead or Alive

GARCIA was a tough town. Almost lapping the New Mexico line, and close to the Mexican Border, it was a hangout for questionable characters from two territories and two countries. Fugitives from justice could slip across into New Mexico or, if the business was more serious, hightail for the land of *mañana*, where few questions were asked and fewer answered.

Bull Bellows ran the "Here You Get It" saloon in Garcia. Bull's

reputation was unsavory as his whiskey. Rumors concerning him and his connections with such outfits as Black Bart Cole's gang were rife, and unproven.

Strangers riding into Garcia were subject to a careful scrutiny. Most especially those who saw fit to buy a drink at Bull Bellows' bar.

The tall "cowboy" who rode into Garcia just at dusk, two days after the kidnaping of John Mason, received more than ordinary attention. As he leaned against Bull's bar and discussed a glass of the sulphuric acid and rattlesnake venom Bull sold for whiskey, he was worthy of a second glance, even a third one.

He stood more than six feet in his fancily stitched, high-heeled boots, and his shoulders were plenty wide for his height. His hair was black, and so was the more than a week's growth of beard that darkened his lean cheeks. His eyes, cool and level, were a peculiar green-grey shade. He was dusty and travel-stained and there was a gauntness about him that hinted at days of hard riding and little comfort.

Little wonder that the habitues of Bull Bellows' place regarded him askance—Rance Hatfield, ex-cowboy, ex-Arizona Ranger, now, in the picturesque language of Bigfoot Boldt, a G-man!

"Don't see nobody heah what looks familiar," he mused as he downed the whiskey. "Glad of that—these whiskers mightn't be such a tall order as a disguise."

BULL ran a little lunch counter in conjunction with his bar. The puncher ordered a big meal and ate ravenously. Observing persons noted that he sat facing the door and seldom took his eyes off it. After he had eaten, he strolled to the bar.

Glass in hand, he leaned an elbow on the bar and stared into the fly-specked mirror.

Suddenly he stiffened. Outside had sounded a clatter of swift hoofs.

"Pullin' up in front of the dump!" growled Bull Bellows. "Now what the hell?"

The tall puncher placed his glass on the bar, pulled his hat low over his eyes and continued to watch the mirror.

The door opened and two men entered. One was big and beefy, with a square red face and an authoritative manner. Bull greeted him with scant enthusiasm:

"Evenin', Sheriff Ralston."

Ralston nodded shortly and turned to his deputy, Hank Stevens.

"Keep an eye on them hosses," he ordered. "Theah's jiggers in this section what has been known to steal a man's hoss right from under him and leave him ridin' along on nothin' but air."

Stevens, a lanky, discouraged looking individual, grunted something unintelligible and left the saloon. Ralston strode toward the big center post that supported the sagging ceiling.

"Bull, I got somethin' heah I'd like ta nail up," he said. "It's—"

Abruptly he stopped speaking and stared toward the bar. Glinting grey eyes in the shadow of a wide hat stared back from the dirty mirror. The sheriff barked a single surprised, exultant word:

"Harley!"

The sheriff dropped the folded sheet he held and went for his gun. The tall puncher went into action like a lightning flash through a tub of goose grease. He whirled, leaping as he turned, went across the room in three lithe strides and hit the sheriff before he could draw. The sheriff evidently suddenly felt very tired and decided to rest on the floor. His manner of "lying down" was singularly abrupt.

The puncher never even paused. He nearly took the swinging doors off their hinges as he went through them. Outside sounded a startled shout, a rousing clatter of hoofs and a shot.

Another shot answered like an echo, and somebody cursed shrilly. The hoofs dinned away into the distance.

Just as Sheriff Ralston sat up, the deputy, Hank Stevens, entered the

room. Hank was swearing steadily and rubbing his right arm. He carried a heavy revolver with a shattered stock.

"The blankety-blank-blank shot my gun outa my hand!" roared Hank. "Busted the gun all to hell, and damn neah busted my arm. Who was he and what'd he want?"

"What'd he get?" demanded the sheriff, rubbing his aching jaw.

Hank stuttered. "He—he—he got—"

"I know what he got, yuh stretched-out mistake!" stormed the sheriff. "He got the hosses! Ain't that so? Dontcha lie to me!"

"Yuh was doin' all the lyin' when I come in!" bawled Hank—"on yore back! Whatcha do, stub yore toe on a match stem? Or did the wind of that big jigger passin' jest nacherly blow you off yore feet?"

The sheriff stood up, painfully and slowly.

"You get the hell outa heah and see if yuh kin rent us a coupla hosses," he told Hank pleasantly. "And for Pete's sake don't hand 'em over to the fust jigger what smiles sweet and says please!"

Ignoring Stevens, who barged through the doors oozing profanity, he strode to the center post. He spread out the folded sheet, which proved to be a poster bearing a photograph and a notice. A dead silence fell over the room as the sheriff hammered tacks home with the butt of his six-shooter. Men glanced at the picture, and glanced at each other furtively.

The picture was of a lean-faced man with a heavy black beard, eyes glinting in the shadow of a wide hat. Under the picture were words in bold-faced type:

WANTED

FOR MURDER AND ROBBERY—

DEAD OR ALIVE

HORACE "High-Pockets" HARLEY

$5000.00 REWARD

Followed a resume of the crimes of the wanted man, including the shooting of a stage driver and the robbing of a bank. All peace officers were requested to arrest Harley and hold him subject to the action of the Nevada authorities.

"Hurrahing hoptoads! Five thousand *pesos!*" breathed one of the watchers in an awed whisper. "And he was standin' righ heah at the bar!"

"Uh-huh," commented another dryly, "five thousand dollars'd buy a feller a plumb nice funeral. Me, I prefers to stay pore an' healthy!"

Hank Stevens stuck his houn'dawg chops through the door.

"I got hosses," he drawled, "but theah ain't no saddles."

Sheriff Ralston wailed dismal cuss words. "Coh'se it don't make no difference to you, yuh ganglin' clothespin! Yore feet'll be touchin' the ground and yuh'll be walkin' two-thirds the way! Me, I hafta *sit* on a hoss's back!"

"Betcha me after this heah bareback ride yuh won't be sittin' on nothin' else for quite a spell!" said Hank. "Yuh ready t' go?"

"Wait'll I hang this other reward notice on t'other side the room," grunted the sheriff.

A FEW minutes later hoofs *tittupped* away through the darkness. The sheriff and Hank were on their way back to Cochise, for, as the sheriff phrased it:

"To chase that seven-foot hellion on a slab-sided jughead 'thout a saddle would be jest 'bout as sensible as ridin' the sharp end of a cactus spine after a sore-tailed catamount!"

The drinkers in Bull's bar gathered about the second notice.

"She sez jest the same as what t'other one sez," commented one. "Boys, that's a heap o' money!"

There was a solemn nodding of heads followed by silence.

"Interestin' readin', gents!"

The group clustered about the notice jumped nervously. They cast furtive glances over their shoulders in the direction of the swinging doors.

A man stood there, a tall, black-bearded man with grey-green eyes glinting in the shadow of his wide

hat. Heavy black Colts glowered from the carefully worked and oiled cut-out holsters sagging low across his muscular thighs. Under his cold stare the readers shifted uneasily.

They tensed as he strode to the center post, his slim, bronzed fingers rolling a cigarette, his watchful scrutiny still taking in every detail of the room. He flipped the head of a match with a thumb nail and set the flame to the notice.

As the flame licked along the edge of the paper he ripped it from the post and touched it to the tip of his cigarette. The cold eyes glinted sideward across the room.

"One's enough," he drawled from the corner of his mouth, "and that'un over theah ain't even signed."

Abruptly there was a gun in his left hand. Without even seeming to glance at the notice tacked on the far wall he shot across his right arm, the six reports blending in a drum roll of roaring sound.

"Now she's signed, ain't it?" he nodded, using only his left hand to eject the spent shells and fill the cylinder with fresh cartridges.

"That second gun ain't been shot 'tall," remarked the observant Bull Bellows as the others stared at the notice tacked on the wall.

"And so far as I'm consarned, she *won't* be," grunted a hard-faced individual with notches filed on the barrel of his big Smith & Wesson. "Gents, that's shootin'!"

In the right-hand corner of the notice was now a neat six-holed cross drilled out by the tall man's six bullets!

"Drinks for the house," he announced, holstering his guns and spinning a gold piece onto the bar.

"I wanta place to sleep t'night," he told Bull Bellows a little later. "I put my hoss in yore barn and told yore wrangler to look after him. I want him saddled and ready—*for me*—come daylight."

Bull Bellows breathed deeply. "He *will*," he replied with emphasis.

Still in the role of a fugitive from justice, Rance rode out of Garcia the following morning.

"That sheriff'll be back," he told Bull Bellows, "and next time he'll bring somebody 'sides that hoss-faced dep'ty. I ain't hankerin' for a showdown with a hull posse."

"I wouldn't bet no even money on the posse, jest the same," Bull remarked to his bartender after Rance had left.

CHAPTER III

Black Bart

RANCE rode into the hills. He rode slowly, aimlessly, as would a man who was on the dodge and without any definite plan or purpose other than to keep in the clear of the law forces. Toward evening he made camp, choosing the site with care.

"Any jigger what figgers on closin' in on us has gotta come by way of them thickets," he explained to his horse. "And comin' that way he's bound to make a racket. We'll heah him, jughead, no matter how careful he is."

Whistling softly under his breath he built a fire, boiled coffee and sliced bacon for frying. In the hot grease he baked a batter cake of flour, water and a little salt. As he turned the browning cake, his whistle rose a bit, merrily. He set the pan carefully on the ground beside the fire, chuckling as does a man when, in peace and fancied security, he recalls some humorous happening.

Without turning from the fire he straightened up. Then he hurled sideward and around like a striking rattler. Tense, rigid, he crouched, eyes glinting behind the sights of his big Colts. His voice, brittle as frosted steel, bit at a man who was just stepping through the fringe of the thicket:

"Say yore prayers, *hombre!*"

There was a frightened yelp. The man's hands shot into the air.

"Hold it, feller!" he bawled. "I ain't hostile. I jest been follerin' the smell of that sow belly. Pen them theah hawglegs and don't get

on the prod. I'm plumb harmless!"

If he was, he didn't look it, Rance decided, taking in the grim underslung jaw, cruel mouth and shifty eyes. He was a big man who moved with catlike lightness. A gun swung against his hip. A knife handle protruded from the top of his boot.

"Chances are he's got another one slung back of his neck and mebbe a short-barreled gun cached in his hat," Rance guessed. Aloud he said:

"It's sorta unhealthy to come slippin' up on a man thataway; yuh might get pizened."

"Uh-huh," the other nodded. "I know what yuh mean—lead pizenin'. But I didn't figger on slippin'," he added earnestly. "I didn't know I was so clost to yore camp—them bushes sorta hides it. I left my hoss back theah 'cause it looked kinda thick."

Rance, apparently convinced, leathered his guns.

"Come on and set," he invited. "I'll fry some more bacon."

The other did so, taking a place where he was obviously in no position to endeavor to get the drop on his host.

"Sho' smells fine," he remarked, "and am I hongry! I'm so darn empty I don't cast no shadder."

Rance heaped a plate for the stranger and another for himself. He poured coffee for both. They ate in silence.

The keen eyes of the G-man missed nothing and as he watched the other he began to feel a thrill of triumph. His plan, which had been so carefully worked out and rehearsed with Sheriff Ralston and his deputy, appeared to be maturing.

"Sho' eats mighty finicky for a plumb hungry man," he mused as the other picked at his food. "Betcha that jigger surrounded six helpin's of chuck less'n a hour ago. That's a crook for you—they think jest so far and no farther, slip on little details, and that eventually slips a rope 'round their necks. Guess he's 'bout ready to spill what he come fer."

The stranger placed his messed-up plate of food on the ground and rolled a cigarette.

"I was in Bull Bellows' place last night," he remarked casually.

"Uh-huh?" Rance was noncommittal.

"Yeah," the other repeated, "and I sho' seed some all-fired fancy shootin'."

"Yuh come damn neah seein' some more," Rance told him.

The other ignored the implication. "Feller like you oughta go a long ways—with the right outfit," he remarked.

"I done traveled 'most as far 'round as the handle by myself," Rance said.

"Chances are that's 'fore they started plantin' readin' matter 'bout you all 'round the country," the other remarked pointedly.

"Uh-huh," Rance admitted, "some truth in that."

The stranger leaned forward and spoke earnestly:

"What a feller like you wants to do is tie up with a outfit, one what kin pertect a jigger when he needs it and give him standin'."

The G-man grunted, apparently little impressed.

"I ain't tanglin' my rope with no two-fer-a-nickel wide-loopin' outfit what lives like hawgs and runs like jackrabbits," he snarled.

The other's face reddened with anger. "You think I look like I belong to that kinda outfit?" he demanded. "Feller, you get this straight and hang onto it. I come heah to tell yuh theah's room for a feller like you with the biggest and best outfit in this hull damn country. I come from Black Bart Cole!"

THROUGH White Horse Canyon into the brakes of New Mexico rode Rance Hatfield with the big stranger, who said his name was Rip Carter.

"Bart'll be glad to see yuh," he declared. "We lost a coupla good men last month down in Mexico and Bart wants to fill in. That's why I was over to Garcia—to cast a eye on a coupla *hombres* what Bull Bellows

sent word might do. Well, heah's the front door to our spread."

Rance glanced at him in surprise.

"I don't see nothin' but a box canyon with straight-up-and-down walls," he objected. "I was beginnin' to think yuh'd plumb got yoreself lost."

Carter chuckled, and rode straight for the rear wall of the canyon. They were within fifty feet of it and still Rance could see nothing but a towering dark cliff over which tumbled a feathery plume of waterfall.

Straight for the waterfall Carter rode. With the icy spray finger-kissing their faces, he turned his horse abruptly to the left. Rance followed and a moment later saw the "front door!"

Behind the fall the cliff was deeply hollowed, so deeply in fact that two men could ride abreast back of the down-rush of greenish water and be little more than touched by the spray.

At some distant time, doubtless, the catch basin of the fall had been on a level with the floor of the hollow; but countless ages of pounding water had beaten away the hard stone until now the catch basin was many feet farther down. The rushing water formed a perfect screen for the shadowy hollow and the dark cave-opening that gashed its back wall.

"In we go," said Carter.

As they rode into the opening, Rance glanced up at a huge mass of stone hanging by a narrow neck of rock.

"Hope that tired-lookin' hunk don't take a notion to let go all holts and settle down sometime when we're ridin' through heah," he said.

Carter glanced carelessly at the lowering mass.

"I'll stay put till hell freezes over and pigs walk across on the ice. Take it easy now, and don't mind the dark. Theah ain't nothin' to bump inter."

Rance roughly guessed the length of the narrow tunnel at a thousand yards. They had covered four-fifths of that distance when there was a report and a bullet screeched past a few feet above their heads. Rance's hands streaked for his guns, but Carter was not alarmed.

"It's me—Rip!" he yelled.

A voice rumbled out of the greying darkness ahead.

"Who's that with yuh?—I heah two hosses."

"Feller to see the boss," replied Carter. "He's a right *hombre*."

"He'd better be!" growled the voice. "All right, come ahaid."

THE light swiftly grew stronger and Rance saw that the passage curved sharply a few yards ahead. They rode around the turn and out into brilliant sunshine. The G-man drew a deep breath.

"The more I see of places like this," he mused, "the more I know darn well that God knows his bus'ness, spite of the critters yuh find crawlin' 'round in 'em!"

The beauty of the place was truly soul-shaking—a ragged emerald in a setting of scarlet and blue and dusty gold. On all sides towered perpendicular cliffs that walled in the brilliantly green cup a mile or so in diameter. The cliffs were varicolored, and the tall hills which rose beyond their lofty crests were deepest blue and ringed about with saffron flame pouring down from the bowl of the sky like tawny wine into a jade goblet.

"She's a reg'lar hole-in-the-wall," said Carter. "The way we come is the only way out."

Rance nodded, his eyes somber. He was looking over the "critters" that had no business crawling around in that place of beauty.

Bearded, swaggering, bristling with deadly weapons, they crowded around the newcomers—Bart Cole's gang! Beyond them, Rance could see a number of stout cabins, a rambling stable and a corral. Carter was speaking to him again:

"We'll go up to Cap's place fust thing. He'll wanta talk to yuh. You wait outside heah till I tell him 'bout yuh."

Black Bart Cole's cabin, differing but little from the others, was set

apart. Neither cabin nor tree nor boulder that might afford cover or concealment was nearby.

"Don't trust his own men one damn bit," Rance deduced. "A helluva life, take it from me!"

Carter was not in the cabin long. He was, Rance had gleaned, Cole's chief lieutenant. He jerked his head toward the closed door as he approached the G-man.

"He wants to see you right away," he told Rance.

Rance found Black Bart Cole at the back of a big boarded-in table. Because of the sheathing that was nailed to the legs he could see nothing of the outlaw from a little below the armpits down; but the huge shoulders and heavy neck bespoke him a big man and a powerful one. When he spoke, his voice was deep and rumbling and astonishingly harsh.

Rance had never seen Black Bart and he was surprised at his appearance. The man was not dark. His hair was yellow, his eyes blue, his complexion florid. Then Black Bart stood up and Rance saw where he got his gloomy sounding nickname.

From head to foot Cole was garbed in black. Neckerchief, shirt, trousers, boots—all were of the same funereal hue. The only relieving touch were the glistening pearl handles of his heavy guns.

"Them slick handles'll get yuh killed some day, too, feller—if you don't stretch rope fust," Rance mused under his breath. Cole was speaking:

"Carter tells me yuh wanta sign up with me."

Rance shrugged his wide shoulders. "Ain't special anxious," he replied. "Carter asked me to and after he'd talked a while I decided I might give it a whirl. I've allus got along purty well by myself."

"Yuh'll do better with us," Cole said. His voice took on a note of fierceness:

"Yuh're a purty salty-lookin' *hombre,* and Carter seems to think yuh're a reg'lar big he-wolf; but get this straight—*I'm* the real big he-wolf 'round these diggin's. What I say goes, and when I tell a man to do a thing, I want him to do it. Un'stan'?"

Rance stepped forward a pace and looked Black Bart squarely in the eyes. Cole had to lift his chin a trifle to meet the level green gaze.

"Yeah, I un'stan'," the G-man said. "Ev'ry outfit hasta have somebody to run it. When orders is given, they oughta be obeyed, but theah's ways of givin' 'em, and when you give *me* one, Cole, be sho' yuh give it in the *right* way."

FOR a moment the two glances locked like rapier blades, but Black Bart Cole's was the first to slide way. "I don't give 'em any way but right," he rumbled, his face flushing a trifle.

Rance nodded. "All right, I'll sign up, and take orders."

"Carter'll show you wheah to bunk," Cole said. "We all eat together—in the big cook shanty. Oughta be clost to chuck time now."

Rance nodded again, understanding the interview was closed, and turned to the door. His mind, trained to gather details at a glance, noted that the windows were barred and shuttered. The stout door had a heavy bolt which could be quickly shot. He heard it grind into place the instant he closed the door.

"Yaller," he grunted under his breath. "Jest a big bluff what's got by on his nerve; but he's deadly as a sidewinder and jest as treacherous."

Rance was given a cabin to himself. "Carney and Blunt, what shared it, was the fellers what got shot in Mexico," Carter explained. "C'mon, it's time for chuck."

Rance saw nothing of John Mason, but the outlaws, accepting Rance as one of them, discussed him freely.

"It'll be a big haul, if we put it over," a tobacco-stained old villain confided to the G-man. "Almost two thousand dollars for each one of us. Yuh're lucky—yuh'll cut in on it, even though you war'n't heah when the work was done."

Rance asked a casual question: "They keepin' him heah?"

"Uh-huh," the oldster grunted. "Got him locked up in that cabin 'longside the spring. Cook's takin' his chuck over to him now."

After the meal was finished, Rance strolled about among the cabins, apparently merely enjoying an after-supper smoke, but missing nothing. He easily found the cabin in which John Mason was imprisoned. It was small, with but a single door secured by a heavy padlock. There were two windows, mere slits between the solidly planted upright logs. No guard was about, so far as Rance could see.

"Don't need one," he deduced. "Feller inside would hafta have dynamite to bust out, and they ain't figgerin' on anybody tryin' to bust in."

He studied the door as he strolled past.

"Might be able to jerk that staple out with a gun barrel," he decided, "but how to get past that guard posted in the cave mouth is somethin' else again. Carter said they ain't 'lowed to pass nobody out 'thout Cole hisself bein' along and givin' the orders— This thing needs some thinkin' out. Well, I got five more days 'fore the deadline's up on Mason. All I got to do is figger out a way to get through the tunnel and not have this outfit follerin' behind, throwin' lead at me."

Two days later, Rance was given a job—his initial job with the outfit. It was really a simple matter, nothing more than accepting the delivery of a shipment of stolen horses coming out of Mexico and bringing them to the hideout. With him went a hard-eyed individual known as Squint.

As he rode into the greenish light filtering through the waterfall, Rance glanced up at the hanging mass of stone above the cave entrance and had an inspiration. The following night he returned, with the horses, but without Squint. He also had a ragged hole in the sleeve of his shirt and a deep bullet crease that still oozed blood.

"We met a sheriff's posse," he tersely reported to Black Bart. "Yeah, they got Squint and give me this bullet burn, but I managed to save the hosses. Nope, the sheriff won't ride comfortable fer quite a while."

He neglected to inform Black Bart that he himself had delivered Squint to the sheriff, nicely trussed up, and that Sheriff Ralston, who would not ride for a while because of his recent bareback trip from Garcia to Cochise, had with great care creased Rance's arm with a bullet at the G-man's request.

Black Bart swore venomously, but his feelings were somewhat assuaged by Rance returning to him the money which had been the purchase price of the stolen horses.

"Posse picked up them jiggers, too," Rance explained. "That's how we come to get plugged—slippin' them cayuses out from under the sheriff's nose."

Black Bart nodded. "Yuh did well," he conceded.

If he had seen what Rance did at the waterfall entrance of the cave before bringing the stolen horses through, Black Bart might have amplified his remarks.

CHAPTER IV

Jugged

THE days slipped swiftly by, and the deadline for John Mason was but twenty-four hours away. Black Bart was in a villainous temper, for, Rance learned, a message had come from the Lazy-M ranch asking for more time.

"I'll give 'em more time, the blankety-blank-blanks!" swore Black Bart, "and I'll give 'em a nice little souvenir, too—one of that old blankety-blank's fingers! I've a notion to do it t'day 'stead of t'morrer!"

He decided to wait, however, on the chance that a second messenger might arrive with the ransom money.

(Continued on page 118)

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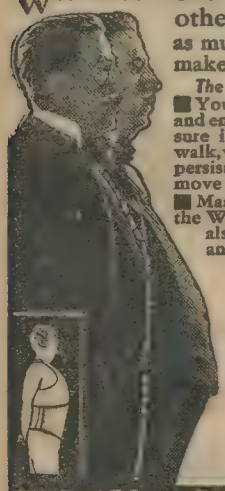

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(Continued from page 116)

"We got four of the boys watchin' that mountain top," Carter told Rance. "They'll let us know whether the money got theah or not. Then we'll see. Betcha that old buster yells!"

He licked his thin lips in pleasurable anticipation.

The day wore on and still Rance had no workable plan for Mason's release. Supper time came and the cook asked Rance to give him a hand with Mason's grub whack.

"Don't like to have both hands full when I go in theah," he confided to the G-man. "That old hellion might jump me. Co'hse he couldn't get away—that's why nobody pays him no mind, but I ain't hankerin' for a busted haid or somethin'."

Handing the food through the half-open door, Rance got a glimpse of Mason. He was a big old man with frosty blue eyes, a bristling mustache and white hair, thinning on the top.

"Don't look pertickler fat to me," Rance mused, wondering if the ten days' imprisonment had worn Mason down. "Ain't much fatter than Cole hisself—jest about his size. He—"

Unexpected, unheralded, an idea had leaped into Rance Hatfield's brain, an idea that caused his eyes to gleam and his lean jaws to tighten under the black beard.

"I b'lieve it'll work!" he whispered. "It's a chance, anyhow!"

A low mutter beyond the western hills brought his glance up to the sky.

"Thunder!" he exulted. "Gonna storm t'night, sho' as hell! That'll help too!"

That night "the roses of the storm" bloomed above the hills in flashing gold and dazzling white. Snapping and crackling, they flamed in splendor, with crashing peals of thunder following each instant of fiery beauty. The level lances of the rain gleamed palely silver in the glare, to vanish as the night folded anew the torn robe of darkness.

Rance Hatfield, tugging and strain-

ing at the stubborn staple which imprisoned John Mason, cursed the lightning glare which any moment might reveal him to some sleepless outlaw.

Suddenly he jerked his gun barrel from behind the staple, stepped back and waited. The lightning roses bloomed, and with the following boom of thunder, Rance's big gun boomed also.

"Nobody coulda told it warn't part of the thunder," he muttered, feeling for the lock. "Why didn't I think of that sooner!"

The heavy slug ripped the lock to pieces. Rance jerked the fragments away from the staple, slipped the hasp and shoved the door open.

"John Mason," he called softly.

There was a moment of silence, then Mason's replying voice.

"Yeah? Who is it?"

"I'm a Gov'ment man," Rance told him. "I fooled Cole into thinkin' I was a outlaw and j'ined up with his gang. Come along; I'm gettin' yuh outa this 'fore they start slicin' yuh inter sausage meat."

Followed rustles and thumps as Mason dressed.

"All right," he said as he stepped through the door, "lead on, feller, I don't know what's up, but anythin's better'n what I been goin' through."

Swiftly, Rance led the way to the cook's shanty. A word to Mason and the two picked up a heavy log that lay ready for chopping. Rance explained his plan as they walked to Black Bart's cabin.

They found the cabin, paused a few feet from the door and waited, their improvised battering ram ready. Again the lightning flashed, and almost instantly the thunder rolled. Its hollow boom drowned the crash as the log struck the door of Black Bart's cabin.

The bolt was ripped from its fastenings, the hinges torn loose. Rance dropped the log and went through the dim opening in a single leap.

Black Bart slept with a light burning, and he slept fully clothed save for his boots. He was off the bed,

(Continued on page 120)

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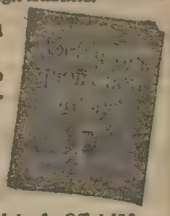

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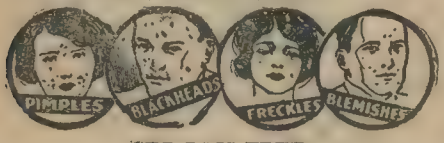

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(Continued from page 119)

gun coming out, when Rance's fist slammed his jaw. Down he went, the G-man crouching over him, gun ready. But Bart was dazed and offered no resistance when they picked him up and placed him in the chair back of the desk, minus his guns and knife.

"Theah's more of his clothes hangin' on the wall," Rance told John Mason. "Shuck yore duds and put on a set of them black things. Then take this knife and whack yore mustache off. Yuh won't enj'y it, but Bart don't wheah no mustache, and yuh gotta look as much like him as yuh kin. Eyes are the same and coloring 'bout the same, and that white hair of yores will look yaller in lantern light to get by. Pull the hat down low and rumble when yuh talk. Heah, put these pearl-handled shootin' irons on, too. That's the finishin' touch. Pull that black hat down low. It—"

Rance went across the table in a streaking dive. Just in time he had noted Black Bart's stealthy groping hands steal down from the table top.

There was a moment of furious struggle, with Mason hovering vainly on the outskirts, awaiting a chance to help Rance, and with the thunder drowning Cole's strangled cries. Then Rance Hatfield stood up. Black Bart did not. He lay still and breathed in jerks.

"Tie him and gag him and roll him in the bunk," Rance decided. "D'you see the contraption he's got rigged up underneath that table? A sawed-off shotgun set to fire through them thin boards and blow the gizzard outa anybody standin' in front of the table. We was both standin' theah when I saw him reach for the triggers. Talk about a sidewinder!"

Ten minutes later two figures rode up to the lighted mouth of the tunnel. The tunnel guard, peering down from his perch amid the rocks, called a sharp challenge. Then he peered closer and changed his tone:

"Oh, it's you, Cap. Goin' out?"

"Uh-huh," rumbled a harsh voice from the stockier of the two mounted figures. "Takin' Harley heah with me. Keep yore eyes skinned, you.

We got mighty clost 'fore yuh bellered."

Rance chuckled exultantly when they had passed the turn and were riding swiftly through the natural tunnel.

"Easy!" he exulted. "They never tumbled a bit. Feller, we done beat—"

"HOSSES comin'!" interrupted Mason.

They were, and coming fast, from the direction of the waterfall. As Rance started to speak, a light flashed, outlining them in its beams.

"Who the hell?" exclaimed a voice. "Oh, it's you, Cap!"

Mason's horse, frightened by the sudden glare, shied sharply, almost unseating his rider. Mason's hat was swept from his head by the jar. His bald scalp gleamed whitely in the lantern light.

"Hell," a voice yelled wildly. "That ain't Cap! That's—"

A blast of gunfire drowned the voice, which rose an instant later in a scream of agony. Rance was blazing away with both Colts. Mason joined it, and answering gunfire from the four men who had been watching the mountain top turned the silent tunnel into an inferno of sound.

"Through them!" said the G-man. "Ride 'em down! The others back theah'll be on top us in a minute!"

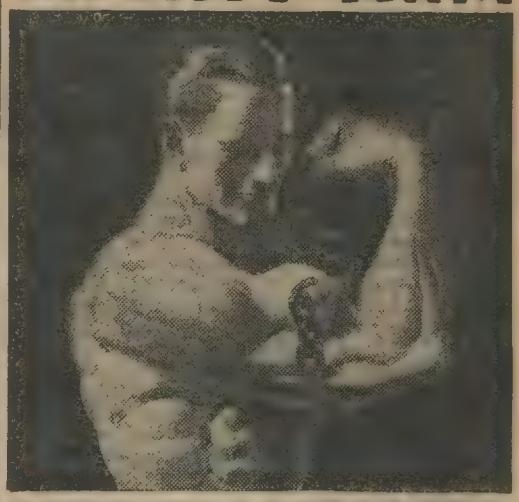
Bridle to bridle, the two thundered forward, Mason bleeding from a scalp wound, Rance with a crease on his left arm to match the self-imposed one on his right. There was a wild flurry of blazing guns and clashing hoofs. Then they were through, leaving groaning, cursing men on the ground behind them. Rance could hear the shouts of the tunnel guard.

"Hold it heah a minute!" he panted as they reached the hollow back of the waterfall.

While Mason was chafing in impatience, the G-man struck a match and touched the flame to something concealed in a crack in the wall. A sputtering thread of fire began to creep swiftly up the crevice.

(Concluded on page 126)

MOULDING A MIGHTY ARM



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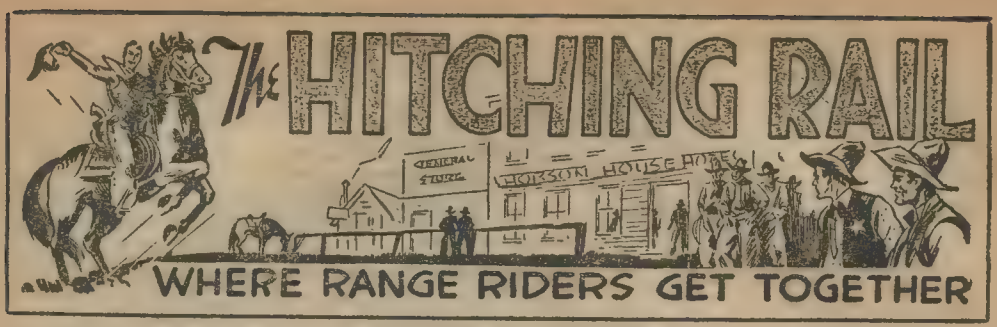

YES, SUH, folks, cloudbursts is th' pesterin'est enemies riders o' th' cow range ever face, bar nuthin' else.

Fella kin take his chance on a wild bronc, or drivin' team 'crost th' Mojave desert when ol' Sol's registerin' hundred an' twenty in th' shade an' water's gittin' danged hot an' low in yore water bar'ls hung 'longside yore wheels. An' cowpokes kin stand an' plug hot lead intuh th' faces o' stampedin' cows an' ride like hell, still havin' a chanct tuh save theirselves. An' ditto goes when up ag'in a mean bunch o' outlaws what don't value human life no more'n a Brahma bull values a jack-rabbit's ears.

Cloudbursts Is Different

But cloudbursts, fellas an' gals!

I'm tellin' yuh real earnest, never tackle one, thinkin' yore able tuh make yore way an' save yoreself an' yore bronc an' mebbe yore best gal ef she's ridin' beside yuh. No, gents an' gentesses, it cain't be did, an' I shore know. When yuh hears rumblin' water up a *arroyo* what's been dry fer years, or hears that roarin' sound back up in th' foothills, spread yore bronc's laigs *pronto* fer high ground an' stay there.

One thing 'bout cloudbursts is that a fella never knows when they're comin'. May be a sunny day where yo're ridin'; or may be heavy rains has happened far up in th' mountins; or may foller hard rains right where yuh are. Riders what's lived in th' cow country long time savvies "sign" an' busts th' wind without lookin' back none.

Shore Grand Scenery

One time, up in Montany, while me an' Beaver Dick was ridin' fer th' ol' Ogallala Cattle Company 'long th' Milk River, we comes tuh where little Beaver Creek empties intuh th' Milk. Day sunny an' warm, ev'thing nice an' dry—too durned dry fer cattle, that time. Hadn't been no water in Beaver Creek fer coupla years, 'cept way back up near its headwaters in th' Bear Paws, forty mile away from us.

Baldy Wiggins o' th' Square-Bar outfit was ridin' with us. We was drivin' some fifty Dumb-bell steers an' takin' our time, smokin' an' chattin' an' not givin' a dam', feelin' right good all ways an' no rustlers 'round tuh mar th' scenery—an' it shore's some real scenery there in th' Bear Paws, folks. Grand, from pinnacled peaks tuh wide-sweepin' plains far's yore eyes kin see.

Thunderin' Water

Well, we comes tuh th' lower end o' Beaver Creek 'bout noon an' stops tuh grub. Cows started grazin' quiet an' nice. Our saddle broncs chawin' grass, reins draggin' as usual. Our cook fire goin' good an' bacon an' coffee startin' tuh tease our nostrils way yuh all knows. And then we three *hombres* jerked stiff.

Up in th' hills comes that rumblin', roarin' sound what no real cowman ever mistakes—thunderin' water, headin' our way!

Warn't no time a-tall afore we seen th' head o' that flood rippin' down on us like all hell-an'-gone, fifteen feet high, brown as yore last year's Stetson an' playin' with big boulders like a baby plays with them cellyloid rings.

Beaver Dick, Baldy Wiggins an' me was in our kaks afore yuh could blink yore best eye, an' racin' fer high ground.

Beaver an' Baldy made it fine, but my bronc hit ag'in somethin' mebbe a prairie dog hole, an' down we went. When I got tuh my feet, my bronc an' me was still on high ground, but between us an' th' high ground Beaver an' Baldy'd reached, fifty yards from us, that tearin' roarin' flood was rushin' furious, draggin' th' soil, trees, brush, boulders, everything, with it at race-hoss speed.

Marooned on a Hill

Me an' my bronc was marooned on our little hill, while Beaver an' Baldy an' their broncs war marooned on theirs. Afore we could do a thing, water was boilin' all 'round both our hills, makin' th' wide plain a monstrous, rushin', death-dealin' lake what'd wash away a stone house in a split-second, ef they'd been a stone house anywheres around—which they wasn't. No ranch within twenty mile o' us. Our herd was clawing up behind me.

Somehow, our two pack hosses, carryin' our grub sacks, was beside me on my hill—an' that left Beaver Dick and Baldy over on their hill without no grub a-tall. None of us could go down off'n our hills; an' three days went by thataway, th' flood coverin' all th' low parts an' still soundin' like a power plant goin' wild.

(Continued on page 124)

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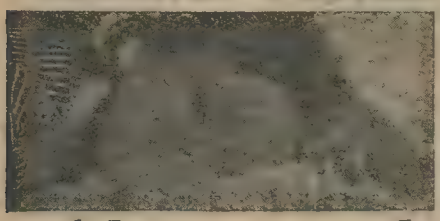

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(Continued from page 122)

Third afternoon, Beaver an' Baldy shouted over tuh me they war shore starved an' tuh bring over our grub.

Ridin' Head Over Heels

Well, every fella's a fool some time or other, an' that time it was me. I packed some uv our grub back o' my kak, straddled my bronc an' rode intuh that water. Next second me an' my hoss was doin' fancy stunts, head over heels, tumbled headlong like we war matches in a bathtub what some kid war splashin' while his Ma washed behind his ears.

All I seen war my bronc's kickin' laigs an' blue sky above an' muddy water all 'round me. Flood drove me intuh some trees an' I grabbed one trunk an' held on, holdin' my reins in one hand. That swung my bronc around below me an' he scrambled with all four feet fer solid footin' an', thank Gawd, found it—a ridge what war jest below th' surface.

I flings myself to 'im, grabs th' saddlehorn, gits aboard an' there we sits while I tries tuh figger out which way tuh turn. Final, I decides tuh leave it up tuh my bronc. An', fellas an' gals, he takes one tender step after another 'long that ridge, gits across tuh th' hill where Beaver Dick an' Baldy war watchin' us, ropes in hand tuh toss 'em tuh us soon's we got clost enough, their eyes bulgin' an' figgerin' me an' my hoss was due tuh a watery grave right fast.

My Bronc Found His Way

But my bronc found his way. Baldy throwed me his rope an' him an' Beaver Dick drug us outa th' water an' ontuh solid ground. Folks, I been hit a heap o' times with diff'rent things, from whiskey bottles tuh quirts an' flyin' hoofs an' sech, but warn't never hit by nuthin' with th' power that cloudburst had.

An' I coulda filled our water bar'ls with th' gallons o' flood water what had gone intuh my stomick. But we fellas, safe until th' water went down, squatted there on our high-heels an' shore et up all that water-soaked grub like it war Sunday pie. But I git shiverin' yit when I thinks where that bronc an' me mighta been carried ef th' hoss hadn't struck that little ridge.

Th' Milk flows intuh th' Missoury, that one intuh th' Mississippi an' that intuh th' Gulf o' Mexico an' that out intuh th' Atlan-

ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS ON PAGE 54

1. They are too smooth, making a quick draw impossible. Also, they are visible in darkness, making owner an easy target at night.
2. Col. William F. Cody (Buffalo Bill).
3. Yosemite National Park, California.
4. It is not in Colorado—but in Southeastern California. About 200 miles long, it extends from San Gorgonia Pass southeast to the Gulf of California.
5. April 3, 1860. Between San Francisco, Calif., and St. Joseph, Mo.

tic. Durn, I mighta wound up in one o' them French seaside resorts, drinkin' Russian vodka or suthin'.

Yarns About Rattlers

Here's a letter from Billy Walters, o' Tulsa, Oklahoma, an' his picture shows 'im sittin' on a black hoss front o' uh oil derrick; an', judgin' from Billy's smile, that oil derrick's changed his ranch intuh a right fancy income; saddle an' bridle, too, looks like they was made o' gold dollars, with all them studs an' *tapaderos* an' things.

When I'm needin' *dinero*, Billy, reckon I'll send yuh a wire, collect. Ain't no fakin' yore way o' sittin' a bronc, neither, Billy boy. Yo're branded—cowboy from haid tuh heels.

Billy asks how 'bout th' yarn that a rattler kin strike farther'n his own length. They's heaps o 'yarns 'bout them ol' rattlers, son, like fish stories. I've watched a heap o' snakes (not in bottles) an' ev'ry summer I kills some rattlers when on th' range, where they're right frequent. An' I never did see one strike longer'n his own length or more'n half that distance. Usually, I'd say 'bout half tuh three quarters o' his own length. But keep back fully twict his length when yo're fightin' 'im, son, an' live longer.

A Real Cow-Gal

Comes Miss Katy Calhoun o' Austin, Texas, a real cow-gal judgin' by her picture on her palomino. Shore fine tuh look at yuh, Katy, an' at yore bronc. Both make me want tuh meet up with yuh an' shake. Gal after my own heart. An' so yuh lived four years down in Australia, eh? Fine.

Me, I spent some years down thataway

(Continued on page 126)

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(Continued from page 125)

onct, too — Philippines, China, Japan, an' rid them trails o' ooze aplenty. Sometimes git homesick tuh see them places ag'in. So yuh asks about ol' Fort Davis, near Alpine, Texas. Yore grandfather served there, in th' cavalry, eh? That's *bueno*. Them was th' days, Katy, Injuns, outlaws an' all.

Reckon I knows th' old cavalry post better'n you knows yore Austin. You knows yore streets an' sech. But I know th' gopher holes, where th' rattlers wanders on hot days, th' ways up them rocky hills behind th' post an' where them ol' Injun painted rocks is an' sech. Been right there an' wisht I war back ag'in, with th' ol' pals what's gone West.

Fort Davis is twenty-five miles from Alpine, through a wonderful canyon trail, Katy. Little town o' Fort Davis is clost tuh th' post. Officers' quarters an' barracks still stand, an' th' ol' flagpole's still standin'. Troops was stationed there from 1880 till 'bout 1891, fightin' Injuns, outlaws, rustlers an' sech, guardin' th' Big Bend country when times was right adventurous.

A Heap o' Hard Ridin'

Apache, Comanches an' outlaws was doin' a heap o' dirt them days. Geronimo an' his band o' Apaches give them troops a heap o' hard ridin' an' fightin' in them days. Him an' his band had been drove from New Mexico intuh Old Mexico an' usta ride up an' raid ranches south o' Fort Davis. Then out th' troops went, hellbent.

Th' post was right beside th' old Co-

(Concluded on page 128)

JUSTICE ON THE RANGE

(Concluded from page 121)

"All right," Rance told Mason, "get goin'—make it snappy!"

Before they were any great distance down the canyon, a sharp crash sounded behind them, followed by a low rumble.

"That was funny-soundin' thunder," exclaimed Mason. "It—"

"Damn funny thunder!" Rance chuckled. "Yuh see, when I rode in t'other day with them stolen hosses, I planted a hefty charge of dynamite under that hunk of rock hangin' up theah to the tunnel roof. What sounded like thunder was that rock tumblin' down and blockin' the only way outa that locked-in canyon. Black Bart and his outfit can take their ch'ice of comin' out peaceful and surrenderin' or stayin' in and starvin'. Yeah, we got Black Bart Cole purty well jugged!"

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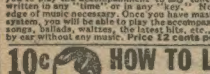

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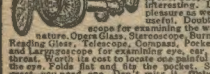

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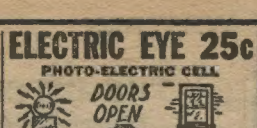

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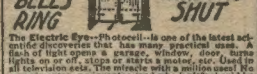

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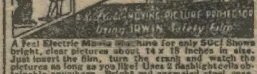

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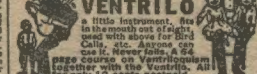


With a bunch of these bills, it is easy for a person of limited means to appear prosperous by flashing a roll of them. Looks like the proper time and peeling off a genuine bill or two from the outside of the roll. Thoroughly tested will be found to be just what is desired. Prices, postpaid: 48 bills, 10c; 150 for 50c, or $3.50 per thousand postpaid.

Hands Up! Pistol Cigarette Case

25c

It looks like a deadly weapon, but it is really a most original cigarette case. Better than the latest thing in many a workbench encounter. Great fun "sticking up" your friends. Never equipment protest. Pull the trigger and the slide flies open, exposing the cigarettes. PRICE 25c ppd. Catalog 10c

DANCING

25 Cents

LATEST STEPS. Be popular. Good dancers are always admired—always in popular quests. Partners welcome them eagerly. The newest, smartest steps without a teacher. Don't make excuses when the music starts. Be part of fun from parties and dances. If you want to become a perfect dancer, learn to dance at home with ease, and say "GOOD BYE WALLS." How to develop poise and control, improve your dance steps, avoid holding hands with to music, how to lead, latest Fox Trot steps, Natural and Reverse Turns, the Reverse Waltz, the quickest way to learn to smooth Waltz, Backward Changes, the Continental, the famous Rica dance, the Manhattan, the College Rhumba, the Charleston, and many other. Art Of Dancing. Price 25 Cents Postpaid.

BLANK CARTRIDGE PISTOL

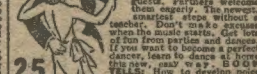
REVOLVER STYLE

25c
50c
$1.00

Three new models now out. 25, 50c and $1.00.

Well made and effective. Patterned after type of Western Officer. Appearance alone will scare a burglar. Takes 22 Cal. Blank Cartridges obtainable everywhere. Great protection against burglars, trespassers. Have it lying around without the danger attached to other revolvers. Fourth of July, New Year's, stage work, starting pistol, etc. Small size 25c. Medium size 50c. Large size $1.00. Blank cartridges 50c per 100. Holster (shoulder type) 50c. Shipped by Express only, not prepaid.

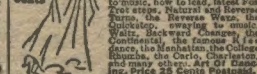
CHAMELEON 25c



WATCH IT CHANGE COLOR!

Get one of these most wonderful of all creatures. Watch it change color. Safely tie it by a string to the lapel of your coat as a curiosity. Shoots out its tongue like a flash. Flies and insects are its food. Easy to keep. Can go for months without food. About six inches. Found in tropical regions in U.S.A. Will guarantee safe arrival and live delivery. Only 25c ppd.

BIG ENTERTAINER

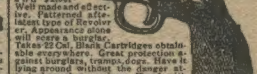


Big Joke & Novelty Book, 25 Cents. 11 Parlor Games. 11 Parlor Tricks. 10 Puzzles. 10 Picture Puzzles. 51 Amusing Experiments. Dumb-bell and Dumbbell Shadowgraphy. Fortune Teller. Fortune with Cards. Organ Grinder, etc. Hypnotism. Ventriloquism. Cut-outs for Checkers, Chess, Dominoes and Ludo. 21 Tricks with Pencil and Paper. 25 Amusements. 25 Card Tricks. Crystal Gazing and 16 other things for over 10 cents postpaid.

125 CARD TRICKS

Contains all the tricks and deceptions with cards ever invented, including the tricks of the most celebrated Conjurers, Magicians and Prestidigitators. Simplified and adapted for home amusement and social entertainments. Complete exposure of all the card tricks by gamblers. How they "deal from the bottom" and win money by their tricks. Explains "Stock" and "Second" deal tricks. Price 25 cents postpaid.

MERRY WIDOW HANKY



A perfect medal of the most necessary elegance portrayed by ladies, even when folded and worn in the pocket, but the appearance of just a corner of man's handkerchief. A clever, funny joke. Price 15 cents postpaid.

STEAM ENGINE 25c

World's biggest value in mechanical toys. Actual working steam engines. Model, by 3-1-2 inches in diameter. Watch it run. Tool it's fun to make the fly wheel spin around and hear the engine puffing when you get the "steam up." Just light up. All the boiler will need and a few drops of gasoline. Then watch it go! Runs for hours. Filling and wiping will drive many small toys of the fly wheel type. Strongly constructed and guaranteed to run. The engine is beautifully lithographed in seven colors. Real worth a dollar. New model which runs on alcohol or gasoline as well. Price 25c postpaid and packing. Electric Motor, 25c plus 10c for postage and packing.

BUILD THIS LIE DETECTOR

GUILTY OR INNOCENT OF MURDER? Nobody present to help you find, no witnesses, no evidence except the convincing report of this LIE DETECTOR. It said he lied! Read this true story how a cold-blooded murderer might have gone free. It it were not for the lie detector. Make the LIE DETECTOR yourself and see if anybody is lying. This lie detector works the same as those used in banks, trials, etc. Complete instructions for making the Lie Detector, and actual cases it has solved. Only 25 cents postpaid.

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Here are the outstanding standard brand tire bargains of the year, repaired by the improved "criss-cross" method and by skilled workmen. You take no risk when you buy from York, the old reliable tire house with 19 years of service in this field. Thousands of tire users throughout the U. S. declare our tires give them LONG, SATISFACTORY SERVICE. Buy Now—at these reduced prices and SAVE MONEY.

$1.85 29x4.40-21

$2.15 28x4.75-19

We Receive Hundreds of letters like this

"I bought a 24x4½ of you 2 years ago and it is on my truck yet and good for another year."—John H. Silverthorn, Mich.

Don't Delay — Order Today!

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Size Rim	Tires	Tubes
29x4.40-21	$1.85	$0.85
29x4.50-20	2.00	.85
30x4.50-21	2.10	.85
28x4.75-19	2.15	.90
29x4.75-20	2.25	.95
29x5.00-19	2.55	1.05
30x5.00-20	2.55	1.05
5.25-17	2.60	1.15
28x5.25-19	2.60	1.15
29x5.25-19	2.60	1.15
30x5.25-20	2.60	1.15
31x5.25-21	2.90	1.15
5.50-17	2.95	1.15
28x5.50-19	2.95	1.15
29x5.50-19	2.95	1.15
6.00-17	3.10	1.15
30x6.00-19	3.10	1.15
31x6.00-19	3.10	1.15
32x6.00-20	3.10	1.25
33x6.00-21	3.25	1.25
32x6.50-20	3.35	1.35
6.00-16	3.65	1.45

REGULAR CORD TIRES

Size	Tires	Tubes
30x3½	$1.85	$0.75
31x4	2.65	.85
32x4	2.65	.85
33x4	2.85	.85
34x4	2.90	.85
32x4½	3.00	1.15

HEAVY DUTY TRUCK TIRES

(High Pressure)

Size	Tires	Tubes
30x5	$3.70	$1.95
33x5	3.75	1.45
34x5	3.95	2.00
32x6	7.25	2.75
36x6	9.00	3.05

TRUCK BALLOON TIRES

Size	Tires	Tubes
6.00-20	$3.25	$1.05
6.50-20	3.60	1.95
7.00-20	4.65	2.05

Size	Tires	Tubes
33x4½	$3.10	$1.15
34x4½	3.10	1.15
30x5	3.30	1.35
33x5	3.40	1.45
35x5	3.55	1.55
34x7	$9.95	$3.25
38x7	9.95	3.95
36x8	10.65	3.95
40x8	12.65	4.15
7.50-20	$5.40	$2.75
8.25-20	7.60	$4.95
9.00-20	9.40	5.05
9.75-20	12.95	5.45

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Sirs: Rush to me without charge (1) 32-page book with list of U. S. Government Big Paid jobs. (2) Tell me immediately how to get one of these jobs.

Name .....

Address .....

THE HITCHING RAIL

(Concluded from page 126)

manche Trail, which ran through th' Panhandle down tuh th' Rio Grande. Story goes that Cabeza de Vaca an' his men camped there at th' post, four an' a half centuries ago, when it was nuthin' but wild country. Sorry, Katy, but space must stop me, this time. But history war shore made down there.

Readers, I want yore opinion on a plumb important question. Yuh all been readin' SIX-GUN SANDY, th' swell picture story in THRILLING WESTERN—how do yuh like it? Now we're plannin' t' switch t' a bran' new feature in its place. So write me *pronto* please, tell me what yuh think o' discontinuin' Sandy, an' if yuh got any suggestions t' offer for a new feature.

Well, members o' th' *RANGE RIDERS' CLUB* an' all others, reckon yuh've shore had a big time readin' this fine issue, but jest wait till yuh glimpse our next one, filled with yarns like THE TRAIL HERD, a complete novel by A. Leslie, an' RUSTLER VALLEY, a novelette by Tom Roan, an' many other stories by Grant Taylor, Bernard Breslauer, James W. Egan an' others.

A grand number comin' yore way, folks. An' don't overlook our SWAP COUNTER, what's growin' bigger an' bigger an' bringin' folks plumb clost an' happy.

Well, be seein' yuh ag'in soon, ev'body. Hola!

Buck Benson

APPLICATION 1-36

BUCK BENSON,
The Range Riders' Club,
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I'm rarin' to join your outfit. Here's my brand.

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(Name)

Address .....

City ..... State .....

Stories and features I liked best in this issue .....

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If you desire a membership card, enclose a self-addressed envelope

This is a place
holder for the
inside back cover.

If YOU need MONEY

Here's a wonderful chance to make UP TO $60.00 IN A WEEK and get a Brand New FORD SEDAN besides

Positive Proof

of the opportunity for you to MAKE BIG MONEY

Wouldn't it give you a thrill to make money like this? Money to spend—more where that came from—money to pay for necessities and some left over for luxuries? Read this list. The people who reported these cash earnings have sworn before a legally authorized NOTARY PUBLIC that these are true and accurate reports. I could print SCORES of other sworn statements of big earnings if I had the space. But these are enough to show you the possibilities, for these people reported these earnings from the very same opportunity I now offer you.

		Amount earned in one week
F. J. Mosher	Wyo.	$ 80.00
Wilbur W. Whitcomb	Ohio	110.00
H. D. White	Kan.	47.50
Geo. F. Pike	Idaho	33.00
Tom Noble	Mich.	68.40
R. L. Young	Calif.	22.00
L. P. Dyson	La.	97.20
Clare C. Wellman	N. J.	56.00
Paul T. Snider	Pa.	65.00
Geo. W. Wright	Maine	43.75
Hans A. Seaber	Mich.	51.00
A. Pardini	Calif.	89.00
Norman Geisler	Minn.	129.00
Lamar Dennis	R. I.	83.16
Albert Becker	Mich.	104.00
R. J. McIntire	Idaho	51.97
Eugene R. Wood	N. Y.	61.00
Max Durrett	Wash.	62.00
Lamar C. Cooper	Mich.	80.00
Helen V. Woolmington	Pa.	45.00
A. H. Abel	N. J.	[illegible]
Ruby Hannen	W. Va.	73.00
Adolph Pflueg	N. Y.	63.00
Lambert Wilson	Mich.	73.00
Mrs. Carder	Nebr.	86.40
[illegible] C. Thomas	W. Va.	[illegible]
W. J. Way	Kan.	78.11

Wouldn't you like to see your name on a list like this? Wouldn't you like to make up to $50 to $60 and even $100 in one short week. Then send your name at once. I'll send you all the information Free.

If you are out of work or on part time and need cash at once to pay your bills and live on, you are just the person I am looking for. I have a good opportunity for you right now—a wonderful chance to start right in making up to $10 in a day and quickly increase your earnings as you become established.

Make Money Fast

You don't have to go around penniless in a land of plenty. My system shows you how to make money FAST! Look at these earnings in the column at the left. These are exceptional earnings for any kind of times, but they are especially good right now. If only three or four people had made money as fast as this, you might call it an accident. But *scores* have done it! These are only a few—if space permitted I could print MANY MORE reports of exceptional earnings, every one sworn to as being the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. When these people first heard of my proposition they may have been skeptical. But they were wise enough to investigate. When they received the complete facts that I will now send you absolutely *Free* they opened their eyes in amazement and got busy.

Now I offer you the same opportunity I gave them. The very minute I hear from you I'll send you a few simple, easily read details, explaining just how you can start earning the very first day. You will be amazed how simple this Fast Money Making plan really is.

* * * * *

Ford Sedans Given

I give producers brand new Ford Tudor Sedans as a bonus in addition to cash earnings. Send for Free Facts at once.

WOMEN WANTED TOO!

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I Send Everything

Experience or previous training unnecessary. I send everything you need, and I give brand new Ford Tudor Sedans as a bonus to producers. You handle the money and keep a big share of every dollar you take in as your profit. Nothing difficult about my plans.

Start Earning At Once

My unique plan provides a way to get immediate earnings. As long as you are honest and reliable you are eligible for this opportunity. Due to big expansion program, I want someone in every territory. I am able to give this splendid money-making opportunity to more men and women at once. There is no red tape connected with this offer.

Send No Money—Just Name

Send me your name so I can lay the facts before you, then you can decide if the earning possibilities are satisfactory. Don't miss this chance. It doesn't cost you anything to investigate. You can't lose by mailing the coupon or a penny postcard for free details. Do it today—NOW.

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[illegible]

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(Please Print or Write Plainly)